

THE DANGERS OF TEENS USING MARIJUANA

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Loyola University Health System

Whether states should legalize marijuana for recreational and medical use is a hot topic across the country. As the debates continue a potentially dangerous environment is being created where more preteens, teens and young adult are beginning to use the substance with the feeling that it is safe. In fact, 36 percent of all seniors in high school and 7 percent of eighth-graders report using the drug in the past month, according to a recent study. Though public perception is that marijuana is a harmless drug, research is showing it can have a damaging impact on developing brains and may lead to life-long addiction.

"Teens are seeing marijuana as a safe substance, but its effects on the adolescent brain can be dangerous, especially if there is heavy use. As the stigma of marijuana use becomes less the number of teens using the drug has increased. More high-schoolers in the U.S. now smoke marijuana than they do cigarettes," said Garry Sigman, MD, director of the adolescent medicine division at Loyola University Health System and professor in the Department of Pediatrics at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Marijuana is an addictive substance and, according to Sigman, adolescents are 2-4 times more likely to become dependent on the drug within two years after first use compared with adult users. "Marijuana is the most common substance addiction being treated in adolescents in rehabilitation centers across the country. Like all addictive substances, marijuana is used to lessen uncomfortable feelings like anxiety and depression. Because the type of addiction is seen as less 'intense' in comparison to other substances such as cocaine or heroin, many people don't realize that marijuana can cause dependence and has a withdrawal syndrome," Sigman said.

Some adolescents use marijuana only occasionally because of peer pressure at a party or in a social setting, but others self-medicate with marijuana to cope with emotions and stress. One of the signs of a substance-use disorder is when drugs are used often to cope with uncomfortable feelings.

Addiction isn't the only hazard for adolescents when it comes to smoking marijuana. Research shows that heavy use can lead to neurotoxicity and alternations in brain development leading to:

- Impairment in thinking
- Poor educational outcomes and perhaps a lower IQ
- Increased likelihood of dropping out of school
- Symptoms of chronic bronchitis
- Increased risk of psychosis disorders in those who are predisposed.

"Parents should inform themselves about the scientific facts relating to marijuana and the developing brain and be able to discuss the topic calmly and rationally. They need to explain that the dose of the drug in a 'joint' is three to four times higher than in years past, and that if the parents occasionally used during their lives, they now know that the risk is present if used before adulthood," Sigman said.