Is Marijuana More Addictive Than Other Substances?

by LANA BARHUM

Is Marijuana Addictive?

Many groups who favor marijuana legalization argue marijuana isn't addictive, but research has shown that it can be. In fact, research from the National Institutes of Health shows 30 percent of people who use marijuana can become addicted, and teens who use marijuana are more likely to develop an addiction than adults.

What Is Marijuana?

Marijuana goes by many names – weed, pot, grass, Mary Jane and many other slang terms. It looks like a greenish-gray mixture of dried flowers.

People who smoke marijuana use hand-rolled cigarettes or water pipes. It can also be brewed as a tea or mixed into foods, including cookies and brownies.

The primary psychoactive ingredient in marijuana is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). THC is responsible for the intoxicating effect that marijuana users seek out. THC is found in leaves and buds in the female cannabis plant. The cannabis plant contains at least 500 other chemicals, with many related to THC, collectively called cannabinoids.

Upon inhalation, THC passes from the lungs to the bloodstream and is carried to the brain. It acts on specific parts of the brain, causing a high. Certain parts of the brain that influence your memory, coordination, sensory and perception get the most exposure to THC. That is why these functions are adversely affected by marijuana use.

The strength of the high from marijuana depends on the potency of the THC. THC content in marijuana has been increasing over the past 30 years. There also many other chemicals found in marijuana and many of these are harmful to your health, these in addition to the many types of THC already in marijuana.

Understanding Marijuana Addiction

From a diagnostic and treatment perspective, someone can be physically dependent on a drug, but not psychology addicted.

Being physically dependent on a drug means you struggle with tolerance and withdrawal. Physical tolerate is the effect of depending on more and more of the drug to get pleasure from it while withdrawal is what happens when you don't get the drug.

While people who are physically dependent on a drug need help, they are not psychology addicted. What that means is that they do not give the drug high priority in their lives, over family, friends, social activities and work obligations.

The distinction between physical dependency and psychological addiction is important because people think marijuana isn't addictive due to mild withdrawal symptoms, especially compared to other drugs. A good example of this distinction comes from Dr. J. Wesley Boyd, writing for *Psychology Today.*

Dr. Boyd writes that some people with marijuana addiction will display signs characteristic of psychological addiction. He shares the example of a male in his 20s, who works a fulltime job, and who smokes several times a day. Even though the man wants to stop using marijuana, he is psychology addicted. The drug has taken over his life, and he is unable to stop without professional treatment.

As with the example, marijuana becomes an addiction when someone cannot stop using it even though it is interfering with many aspects of their life. The number of people addicted to marijuana is currently unknown, but at least one study from 2015 finds that 4 million Americans could meet the criteria for marijuana addiction.

Marijuana Addiction Signs and Symptoms

The occasional use of marijuana may not lead to abuse or addiction. But there is still the potential for addiction and marijuana does have harmful effects.

Signs of Marijuana Use

Early on, the drug user and loved ones likely would not notice a problem but over time, physical dependence and addiction eventually take over.

Immediate physical symptoms of marijuana use are:

- Dizziness
- Bloodshot eyes
- Short-term memory loss
- Severe anxiety, panic and/or paranoia
- Hallucinations
- Low reaction time
- Increased heart rate
- Coordination problems

Long-Term Use and Addiction

In addition to addiction, marijuana has been associated with long-term problems, including, but not limited to:

- Decline in IQ, especially in young people
- Poor school or job performance
- Impaired thinking and learning
- Lower life satisfaction
- Relationship problems and/or domestic abuse
- Financial problems
- Job loss
- Increased risk of stroke or heart attack

Although mild, marijuana withdrawal can cause the following symptoms:

- Irritable mood
- Nervousness and anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Marijuana cravings

Withdrawal symptoms don't require medical or psychological intervention, but if someone is showing signs of

significant distress, an intervention might be necessary.

It is important to note people who are psychologically addicted to marijuana will continue to use it despite all the problems it brings to their lives. They will also choose to socialize in ways that allow the drug to be part of their lives to the point it is the most important part.

The user will deny he or she has a problem and will do everything to keep loved ones from intervening. This is the point where loved ones start to think about getting the person addiction treatment.

Who Can Become Addicted?

Numerous studies show addiction is related to poor coping and genetics. The fact is anyone can become addicted to any drug or substance (like cigarettes or alcohol.) After all, not everyone with a family history of addiction develops an addiction. Neither does everyone who is struggling with life challenges.

While certain groups of people have a higher risk for addiction, anyone, regardless of their background, can become addicted.

Marijuana is the most used drug in the world and research by the National Institutes of Health shows that nearly 9.5 million people in the United States use it. Young adults – ages 18 to 29 – are at the highest risk for use and addiction.

People who use marijuana to manage anxiety, depression and/or regulate mood are also at risk. Anyone who is self-medicating is just as prone to addiction.

Next page: the consqueneces of marijuana use, hot to quit smoking marijuana and more.

Consequences of Marijuana Use

People who smoke marijuana do it for a variety of reasons. Whether you are it using it to feel good, feel better or different and to allow you to fit in, marijuana use has consequences.

- **Addiction**: According to researchers from Columbia University, New York, New York, up to 9% of people who use marijuana become addicted. Repeated use will lead to addiction, with or without risk factors for addiction.
- **Driving Under the Influence**: Much like alcohol, marijuana has been linked to automobile accidents. One survey found that over 39 percent of drug-related crashes were related to marijuana use, as reported by researchers from the University of Nebraska, Omaha, Nebraska, and New York Academy of Medicine, New York, New York. Marijuana in your system increases your reaction time and distance judgment, alertness, and causes coordination problems, for up to three hours after use.
- **School or Work Problems**: Effects on your attention, memory, and comprehension can last for days and weeks after using marijuana and the more you use it, the worse the effects are. Longtime marijuana use is associated with memory problems, poor mental and physical health, lower salaries, fewer career successes and even lowered life satisfaction.
- **Paranoia and Panic Attacks**: Some people experience paranoia and panic when they are under the influence of marijuana. The reaction stays until the drug wears off. These symptoms can cause long-lasting problems with psychosis, anxiety, and panic in some people and worsen symptoms in people who are already dealing with mental health conditions.

Medicinal Marijuana Use

The United States Controlled Substances Act of 1990 has classified marijuana has a Schedule I substance, which means it has a high potential for abuse. Even though at least half of the states have legalized medicinal marijuana, and many others have legalized it for recreational use, under the federal government, there is no

approved medicinal use.

There are two prescription medications which contain THC that are currently available for medicinal use: Marinol and Cesamet.

Marinol and Cesamet

Both Marinol and Cesamet are used to treat the side effects of chemotherapy. Marinol is also used to treat patients with HIV suffering from cachexia, a wasting away syndrome causing weight loss, muscle atrophy, fatigue, weakness and loss of appetitive.

Medical marijuana has been used for managing a variety of illnesses, including pain, cancer, and depression. One argument for medicinal marijuana is that pharmaceutical drugs have severe side effects and can be addictive and that both these circumstances do not apply to marijuana.

Marinol and Cesamet have regulated levels of THC, so they don't necessarily provide a high. As a result, they are generally addictive.

However, if you are smoking recreational marijuana for managing pain and health symptoms, it is still possible for you to become addicted.

Both prescription THC and smoked marijuana for medical purposes will cause side effects, including:

- Dizziness and drowsiness
- Short-term memory loss
- A high
- Severe anxiety
- Psychosis

Use of marijuana for medicinal purposes is not FDA approved or monitored. As a result, you have no way of knowing if the marijuana is pure, how potent it is, and what type of side effects you will experience.

In states that allow for medicinal use, the only people who can use medicinal marijuana are those who have received a prescription and/or approval from their doctors. Doctors do not prescribe medicinal marijuana to anyone under age 18, who is pregnant, who has heart disease or a history of any mental health condition that causes psychosis.

Marijuana Addiction is Real

Just because marijuana is not as big of a health problem as alcohol, opioids or heroin, it is a still can affect your daily life. For some people, marijuana use can affect every aspect of their life – from their personal life to their professional life.

People who smoke and consume marijuana in large amounts are unable to quit and do not lay any emphasis on the negative consequences likely are addicted. In the long-term, marijuana use will cause memory and concentration problems, and problems with decision making.

Motivation and mood are also affected by marijuana use which may explain some of the reasons a person becomes addicted. This is because withdrawal will decrease dopamine, the brain chemical linked to motivation and there is also a reduction in serotonin, the chemical responsible for mood responses.

How to Quit Smoking Marijuana for Good

If you think you are addicted to marijuana, you may want to quit, and you are wondering how you can go about doing this.

When you are ready to quit, do not replace marijuana with another addictive habit, such as alcohol or cigarettes. You should replace it with a healthy habit, such a new hobby or fitness routine so you can stick to quitting.

Depending on the duration of your marijuana use, the experience may be easy or difficult. The duration of withdrawal for heavy users could take up to three days, but symptoms should take up to 3 weeks to dissipate.

While it possible for you to detox from marijuana on your own, your doctor can prescribe a medication to help you manage withdrawal symptoms. Medications can help you with nausea, vomiting, headaches and muscle pains.

If you cannot quit marijuana on your own, you may need to seek help from a hospital that specializes in addictions or a drug rehabilitation center. Outpatient centers are designed to help people with marijuana addictions and are available to people who wish to remain in their own homes.

Inpatient programs can help people who need a higher level of care that allows them to focus solely on recovering from their addition.

The Takeaway

For some people, marijuana is a harmless indulgence or used for medicinal purposes. But for many others, it becomes an addiction causing adverse effects on their lives.

It is possible marijuana addiction should affect up to 4 million Americans. Quitting is possible, but can cause withdrawal symptoms. Any addictive substance could be harmful to your health and affect various aspects of your life, and marijuana isn’t any different.

If you think you are addicted to marijuana and need help quitting, talk your doctor, loved ones, a religious leader or get in touch with someone who can refer to a facility that specializes in helping people with addiction.