

Marijuana and Youth Health

How does marijuana affect youth health?

THC, the chemical in marijuana that produces the “high,” affects many areas of the brain, including those that control pleasure, memory, thinking, concentration, sensory and time perception, and coordinated movement. The brain is developing rapidly during the adolescent years and outside influences can have a lasting effect, whether those influences are positive, like healthy relationships and opportunities to learn new skills, or negative, like marijuana and other drugs.

Research suggests that regular use of marijuana during the teen years may result in:

- Problems with memory, attention, and learning
- Poorer performance in school and increased risk of dropping out
- Increased likelihood of use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs
- Mental health issues, such as impaired emotional development, depression, anxiety and psychotic symptoms (such as paranoia, and not knowing what is real)

Moreover, marijuana is addictive. While approximately 9 percent of users overall become addicted to marijuana, about 17 percent of those who start during adolescence become addicted. Delaying use makes a difference. The longer young people wait before they try marijuana or any other substance, the less likely they are to develop problem use later on.

The bottom line: Marijuana use is more dangerous for young people than it is for adults.

Marijuana and the developing brain

The adolescent brain has circuits that seek reward and provide motivation for action that operate at high speed. Reward-seeking is appropriate for this time of life, when young people are exploring, leaving the safety of their homes, trying out new things and establishing their own identities. But at the same time, the drive for reward may cause them to take risks for immediate pleasure without pausing to think about longer-term consequences.

Risk-taking is more common among teens than adults because in the adolescent brain, the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain that exercises impulse control is still developing through the teen years and into the early 20s. This may result in youth using marijuana because they crave the “high” or because they want to fit in with their peers (peer approval is a strong reward for teens) without fully considering the pros and cons as an adult would.



Talking about marijuana use during adolescence is important

While the majority of our local middle and high school students (80%) do not use marijuana,* experimentation with substances like marijuana, alcohol and tobacco during teenage years is common. Parents play a crucial role in preventing, delaying and reducing the use of these substances.

Local data show that teens who believe their parents approve of marijuana use are five times as likely to use marijuana as teens who believe their parents disapprove of marijuana use (74% versus 12%).**

Talk directly to young people, encourage them not to use, and help them make informed decisions. Some tips for parents include:

- ◆ Talk to your children. It is never too early to start to have an age-appropriate, non-judgmental discussion. Be clear and specific about your family expectations about marijuana use.
- ◆ Be a good role model. Not only do young people listen to what you say (even if they roll their eyeballs at you!), they watch what you do. Don't drive under the influence, and don't use marijuana around your children.
- ◆ Safely store all marijuana products. Some products, particularly edible ones like gummy bears or brownies, may appeal to children. Store all marijuana products in child-resistant containers and lock them away like you would any medication.

* In the 2017 Easthampton Prevention Needs Assessment, 20% of 8th, 10th and 12th graders reported that they had used marijuana on one or more occasions in the 30 days preceding the survey. 80% said they had not used marijuana at all during that time period.

** 2017 Prevention Needs Assessment.



Resources



The **Marijuana Talk Kit** provides facts about youth marijuana use and tips on how to talk with young

people about marijuana. Download for free at <http://www.drugfree.org/MJTalkKit/>

The **Talk They Hear You Mobile App** helps parents and caregivers learn the dos and don'ts about talking to their children about underage drinking (but it works the same for marijuana or other drugs). It gives parents an opportunity to practice bringing up the topic of alcohol and drugs, learn questions to ask, and adjust their approach with help from coaches. Download for free at your phone's app store or at <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Talk-They-Hear-You-Mobile-App/PEP15-TALKAPP>



Families of 5-8th graders can sign up for the next session of the **Strengthening Families 10-14 program**, offered in Easthampton. Rated the #1 drug prevention program by the World Health Organization. Makes families stronger, teaches youth practical skills, supports parents. Go to: www.EasthamptonCoalition.org



More info at: www.EasthamptonCoalition.org