

## Some key points

Adults who don't have heart disease or psychiatric conditions, don't get high during pregnancy or when it's dangerous, and use pot occasionally probably aren't at risk of any harm to their health.

But, keep these things in mind:

- First time marijuana users may experience anxiety or panic. Use a small amount at first and wait an hour (two hours if consuming edibles) to learn how it affects you. Carefully learn for yourself how much is enough to produce the desirable effect.
- If inhaling, take shallow puffs rather than inhaling deeply in order to reduce exposure to harmful smoke.
- Marijuana with high levels of THC and low levels of CBD may make anxiety or panic more likely.
- Driving while high can cause accidents due to impaired attention, reaction time, and other skills needed for safe driving.
- Using pot during pregnancy may lead to lower birth weight of the baby.
- Becoming dependent on pot happens to 33% to 50% of daily users. Teens who begin early are at greater risk of becoming dependent.
- People vulnerable to psychosis are at risk of a psychotic episode if they use pot.
- Regular pot smoking contributes to chronic bronchitis (wheeze, chronic coughs).
- Older adults with heart disease are at increased risk of angina and heart attack after pot use.
- Beginning use during adolescence can cause a number of learning problems.
- Store marijuana (especially edibles) safely so that it is not attractive to or in reach of children and pets.
- Reduce risk of becoming dependent by using no more than once weekly.

# Recreational Marijuana for Adults

## How marijuana users can minimize risks



More information is available on the University of Washington's "Learn about Marijuana" website:  
[www.LearnAboutMarijuanaWA.org](http://www.LearnAboutMarijuanaWA.org).

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## What are cannabinoids?

Cannabinoids are chemical substances made by the cannabis plant. The best known cannabinoids are THC and CBD; in addition, these plants make smaller amounts of over 100 other cannabinoids.



Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the best known and the main psychoactive (mind-altering) component that is associated with the "high." Selective breeding the last few decades has increased THC levels in cannabis.

Cannabidiol (CBD) is another cannabinoid commonly heard about. In certain cannabis strains, there may be larger concentrations of CBD, which does not cause a high and has other distinct and positive effects. Until recently, American strains of cannabis contained little or no CBD. This has begun to change as more medical marijuana patients seek strains that are high in CBD and low in THC.

### *Why do you need to know about the percentages of THC and CBD?*

The percentage of THC is often taken as a measure of cannabis potency (how strong the substance is). It's possible that very high THC numbers may be more dangerous to the user. However, this would only be the case if someone uses too much. In fact, if a cannabis sample is of higher potency, it may require less to produce the desired effect, and this could be a good thing if it means less exposure to smoke. Cannabis in the form of butane hash oil (BHO, butane honey oil, wax, shatter or dabs) is extremely potent compared to other forms.



If you try a higher potency cannabis for the first time, it is advisable to use a small amount and wait to judge the effects before taking more.

Compared to THC which often makes people sleepy, CBD tends to increase alertness in low to moderate doses. It may also blunt the peak high from THC while mildly prolonging its effects.

CBD has a tendency to reduce anxiety or even paranoia from THC. Additionally, research has shown that it may reduce the drug abuse liability (tendency toward addiction) of cannabis. Thus, early research would suggest that having a greater amount of CBD in cannabis *may* help to make it safer.

## Can getting high cause memory problems?

Some people who get high a lot say their memory is poor. That's one of the reasons people give for deciding to quit pot. Here's what scientists tell us.



The THC in pot has the ability to affect cannabinoid receptors, specific sites in the brain.

One type of cannabinoid receptor, CB<sub>1</sub>, is concentrated in parts of the brain, the hippocampus for example, associated with memory.

For some, being high feels like getting lost in their thoughts, forgetting what they're doing and not staying concentrated on a goal.

Strangely enough, this kind of experience is probably due to pot's effects on short-term memory.

On the other hand, scientists also think that long-term daily pot use may cause subtle impairments in memory and attention that persist even when a person isn't high. There are different types of memory. For example:

One type involves knowing. You know what a cobra is, even though you're not sure when you saw one in a zoo or when you read about cobras.

Another type involves remembering. You remember what you did on your last birthday and who you were with, and what kind of birthday cake you had. You remember what you studied last week in school.

A third involves procedure. You can ride a bike today because you once learned the skills involved.

Scientists think that problems with the second kind of memory can happen when someone is high. It can be particularly difficult to remember recently learned information.

This may explain why students who frequently get high may see their school grades suffer because pot's effects on memory get in the way of learning.

**Important to remember:** Being high can interfere with memory for recently acquired information.

## Is driving while high a big deal?

Many of us know people who are absolutely certain that they can drive safely after getting high. You'll hear them saying: "I've done it lots of times and never got into an accident. Anyway, I'm really careful."

The fact is that sometimes they're right. They've driven while high and nothing bad happened.

But, here's the deal. The same thing is true for some people who drive after drinking alcohol. Some of the time they make it home without having an accident.

And then there are the times when a driver who has been drinking causes a wreck, sometimes with people getting killed, because the skills they needed were impaired. **The same is true for pot.**

Driving high increases the risk of accidents. Why? It's because driving while high can cause impairment such as:

- Lane weaving
- Slower tracking of events
- Divided attention
- Slower reaction time

And combining pot with alcohol makes these risks of an accident even greater.



**Some good ideas:** Plan ahead to avoid the need to drive after getting high.

If you must drive, give yourself a safety margin and wait for 3 or 4 hours if you've used marijuana by inhaling. But, because ingesting marijuana (for example consuming edibles) delays and prolongs the effects, the safety margin will need to be hours longer.

Don't let anyone convince you to get into a car driven by someone who's high or been drinking.

Don't put others at risk because of your pot use!

## Can you become dependent on pot?

Most people who get high do so occasionally. It doesn't take over their lives. It doesn't take priority over responsibilities at home, school, work or with friends.

For some people, however, their pot use looks a lot like an addiction. Here are some of the signs:

- They intend to limit how often they get high, but they break their own rules.
- They want to cut back or maybe even quit, but they don't follow through.
- Being high takes up much more of their time than they want it to.
- Things that are important to them (friendships, family, school work, sports, music, etc.) are sacrificed so that they can get high instead.
- They worry about some problems that pot might be causing in their lives, but they continue getting high anyway.

Want to minimize the risk of dependence? Keep your use to weekly or less often.

If you or someone you know wants help, take a look at these resources: [www.marijuana-anonymous.org/](http://www.marijuana-anonymous.org/) "Reduce Your Use"—an online counseling program [www.reduceyouruse.org.au/sign-up/](http://www.reduceyouruse.org.au/sign-up/)

## Why should teens hold off using marijuana?

Some teens get high and think pot's no big deal. However, doctors strongly urge teens to wait until they're 21 or older before using pot. Why? It's because of what's still developing in an adolescent's brain.

Parts of the brain, the pre-frontal cortex for example, may not develop the way they're supposed to if the person smokes a lot of pot while they're a teen.

What does that mean? It may mean:

- Problems with memory
- Difficulty learning
- A harder time planning
- Struggling with solving problems



And here's what makes it more serious: it is possible that these problems will be permanent.

There's more information to think about. Teens who use a lot of pot *may* have an increased likelihood of depression, anxiety, psychosis, or other mental illness.

### Some things to think about:

Getting high is legal for adults and it's tempting for teens. But, many teens decide to wait until they're adults.

*People who begin getting high before they're adults and do it frequently are risking a lot.*

## Can using marijuana affect your mental health?

This is an important question, but there's a lot that scientists can't tell us yet.

**Question.** Can some people become seriously depressed if they get high, maybe even to the point of committing suicide? What about anxiety or psychosis?

**Answer.** Yes, but scientists aren't sure that pot *causes* these problems. Maybe it's something else going on in the person's life that causes these things to happen.

**There's an important exception.** People with a vulnerability for or history of psychosis risk having a psychotic episode if they get high.

In summary, there's a possibility of risk to mental health. *So how do you take care of yourself if you use marijuana?* Tune in to what your body is telling you. If you seem to be frequently depressed or anxious after getting high, consider the possibility that pot isn't working for you.

If you're having suicidal feelings and thoughts when you get high, maybe pot is contributing to this, or at the very least it is not helping. Help is available at [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

If you're a teen, scientists believe the risks of mental health problems, now and later in life, are greater for you if you get high.

Be careful with marijuana that has high THC and low CBD content. It may lead to anxiety or panic.

## Need to worry about damaging your lungs?

Are people who smoke pot at risk of diseases of the lung such as lung cancer or lower respiratory tract infections?

Scientists have been concerned about this because marijuana and tobacco smoke have some of the same contents that have toxic effects on respiratory tissue.

So, what does the latest research tell us?

Regular marijuana smoking is likely to increase symptoms of chronic bronchitis (frequent coughing, sputum production, wheezing.)

There does not appear to be an association of marijuana smoking and airflow obstruction.

For the occasional user, the inhaling of THC causes bronchodilation (decreased resistance in the respiratory airway and increased airflow to the lungs.) Smoking marijuana alone, not in combination with tobacco, does not appear to cause Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Diseases such as emphysema.

It's uncertain whether marijuana smoking leads to pulmonary infection (inflammation in the lungs).

If someone takes large puffs, inhales the smoke deeply into their lungs, and holds their breath, much more tar from marijuana smoke is deposited in their lungs than is typically the case with tobacco inhalation.

Scientists are not certain whether marijuana smoking can increase the user's risk of cancer. While many studies don't find an increased risk, it's still possible there is such a risk for heavier marijuana smokers.

**A good idea:** Take a look at vaporizers to reduce the risk of lung damage from inhaling smoke.

## What if you're pregnant?

Just as alcohol crosses the placental barrier, so does THC. But does THC exposure damage the fetus?

The answer is: we don't know enough yet to be certain about all of the possible risks. One thing that scientists do believe, however, is that regular marijuana use during pregnancy leads to babies born with reduced weight.



Scientists are still looking into some other possible risks to the baby, including behavioral and developmental delays during the baby's first few months that may persist into childhood and adolescence.

During breast feeding, marijuana consumed by the mother is also consumed by the baby through mother's milk and may be harmful.

There's another possibility, and this has to do with the parents. For some people, getting high might interfere with their ability to reproduce.

### Some food for thought:

Even with so many unanswered questions, the risk is too great.

- Don't get high if you're pregnant.
- Don't get high during the breastfeeding period.

If you and your partner are unsuccessful in trying to get pregnant and you're getting high regularly, pot use might be getting in the way.