

## Substance Abuse - Marijuana and teens.

### What parents should know

As more states make marijuana legal, more teens may feel that it isn't dangerous. This puts them at higher risk for using marijuana and developing a problem.

"Teens may think because it is legal, it is safe," says David L. Atkinson, M.D., Medical Director of the Teen Recovery Program at Children's Health<sup>SM</sup>. "Most of these teens believe in the idea that it is a medicine. They think doctors wouldn't prescribe a medicine that is harmful, but in fact medicines are harmful when used without a prescription or without doctor supervision."

According to the 2017 Beyond ABC report statistics, 1 in 5 middle and high school students in Texas use marijuana. Learn about the risks of marijuana use in teens and ways to talk to your child about it.

### What are the effects of marijuana on the teenage brain?

Marijuana can damage the teen brain as it continues to grow. A 2018 study showed marijuana is more damaging than alcohol to their brain. It can cause problems with memory and increase impulsiveness that continues after marijuana is stopped.

"Marijuana is addictive," says Dr. Atkinson. "Like any drug, how addictive it is depends on how much people use, how they get it into the brain and what age they start using."

Starting marijuana use during their teens makes it more addictive because of how their brains work. Teenage brains want to feel things emotionally and are often willing to take more risks. This can lead to a higher use of drugs. Using marijuana can also make teens more likely to become addicted to other substances later in life.

Using marijuana before age 16 has also been shown to bring on some mental health conditions. THC, the part in marijuana that affects the brain, can change behavior, including hearing voices and seeing things that aren't there.

Marijuana use can also cause long-term damage to memory. This is even more true for working memory which lets you have several thoughts in your mind at once.

Finally, marijuana lowers the desire to do things. In teens, this effect can be huge as they may miss a chance to do things that won't happen later in life. Missing these can have a snowball effect on their life, changing what education, jobs, and relationships they are able to have as adults.

### Vaping and marijuana

With the growing popularity of vaping, marijuana can become even easier for teens to use. A new study found that nearly 1 out of 11 middle and high school students have smoked marijuana using e-cigarettes.

Dr. Atkinson warns that vaping marijuana has special risks. "The use of e-cigarettes to vape has enabled students to get away with using marijuana much more often and in more locations than they typically would," says Dr. Atkinson. "There's not much of a smell produced, and kids can assure anxious parents that it is just flavoring or just nicotine, not marijuana." Dr. Atkinson warns that some vaping cartridges can be up to 90 percent pure marijuana and even CBD oil cartridges may contain THC.

"E-cigarettes also allow kids to 'microdose' marijuana all day long," says Dr. Atkinson. "They give themselves a small amount up to 30 times per day." Vaping throughout the day, even in tiny doses, leads to heavy use among teens – putting them at risk for long-term health problems.

### **How parents can talk to teens about marijuana**

Talk with your child as early as possible about marijuana – as young as 10 or 12 years old. Dr. Atkinson says you should make your values about no drug use clear and speak openly about marijuana.

Dr. Atkinson says it is okay if you don't know all the answers about drugs. If your child has questions, look them up together on reputable websites. Answer questions about your own past use honestly and include why you never used or stopped using.

### **Signs of marijuana use in teens**

If you think your child is using marijuana, there are signs of substance use to look for:

- Reddened eyes
- Giddy or over happy behavior
- Laughing at the wrong time or wrong things
- Drug equipment like bongos, rolling papers or vape pens
- Friends using marijuana
- Common mentions of marijuana in the teen's music or conversations

These signs may not mean that your child is using marijuana. These signs can be a good starting point for you to talk with them openly and honestly about the harms of marijuana.