



MARIJUANA FACT SHEET

What is marijuana?

Marijuana is made from the hemp plant (*Cannabis sativa*). The leaves, stems, and flowering tops of the plant are dried and smoked in cigarettes (joints) or in pipes. Marijuana also can be ingested.

Chemically, marijuana is complex. When smoked, it produces over 2,000 chemicals. The main psychoactive chemical in marijuana is tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).

Marijuana belongs to a class of drugs called psychedelics. These drugs can act as either stimulants or depressants. Mainly, they distort perceptions and intensify sensations.

What happens to marijuana in the body?

When marijuana is smoked, its chemicals pass through the lungs into the bloodstream. Then they circulate throughout the body. In the brain, these chemicals act as mild hallucinogens. A marijuana high produces distorted perceptions and feelings of euphoria and lethargy.

THC and other chemicals in marijuana are stored in fatty tissue in the lungs, brain, and reproductive organs. They remain long after the high has worn off. Traces of the chemicals from one joint can linger in the body for four weeks or even longer.

What are the physical effects of marijuana?

In the short term, marijuana alters perceptions and interferes with memory, thinking, and learning. It slows reflexes and impairs coordination.

In the long-term, marijuana can damage the lungs and throat. Marijuana smoke contains more cancer-causing agents than tobacco smoke. Marijuana also is known to affect the immune system. Long-term use can diminish the body's ability to fight disease.

Also, because THC is stored in the brain and reproductive organs, these organs are especially likely to be damaged. In men, marijuana use can result in lower levels of testosterone, lower sperm counts, and increased numbers of abnormal sperm. In women, marijuana can cause menstrual problems and irregular ovulation.

What about the psychological effects?

Marijuana tends to create a feeling of detachment - of being outside the real world. Chronic use can lead to apathy and a lack of interest in learning and other activities. Among teenagers, marijuana use is associated with failure to grow and mature emotionally.

Is marijuana addictive?

Recent research indicates that marijuana can produce dependence, both physiological and psychological. Many become compulsive users and have trouble stopping, despite negative consequences. Tolerance to marijuana occurs quickly. Chronic users can experience physical withdrawal symptoms when they stop.

Why is marijuana called a gateway drug?

Marijuana, like alcohol, is a common choice for early drug experimentation. Use of marijuana often paves the way to use of other drugs.

Things to Remember About Marijuana

1. Marijuana causes a distorted sense of distance and time, altered vision and impaired coordination. Many drivers involved in accidents or arrested for unsafe driving have tested positive for marijuana use.
2. People frequently use marijuana in combination with other drugs, such as alcohol. This increases the degree of impairment.
3. The marijuana sold today is considerably more potent than that sold in the 1960's and '70's.
4. Marijuana may contain harmful additives. Plants sometimes are sprayed with toxic pesticides. Some dealers add chemicals like PCP ("angel dust").
5. Marijuana use during pregnancy affects the fetus. It can contribute to low birth weight, growth retardation, and learning problems.
6. Marijuana is an illegal drug. It is against the law to buy, sell or possess it.