

# What's Pot Got To Do With It?



## Important information for people with mental or emotional problems

Although it is still against the law to supply or use Marijuana, many people in Australia do use it or have tried it in the past. It is important for people with psychological problems to know something about marijuana if they have used it or are thinking about trying pot. This pamphlet answers some of the questions that are important in making your decision.

### Does marijuana cause mental illness?

Major mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar illness are no more common now than they were in times when pot smoking was uncommon, so it is not likely that marijuana causes these illnesses.

However, if you have emotional or psychological problems, you should know that people who use marijuana have more episodes of their illness and relapse more often. They generally have to spend more time in hospital than non users. People with a mental disorder who use pot become paranoid and suspicious very easily, and can suffer from severe depression which may also require treatment in a hospital.

### What's In Marijuana?

Marijuana contains about 60 compounds called

cannabinoids. The one which produces the buzz is called THC. THC is more concentrated in hashish and hash oil than in the leaves and stems, and the amount of THC also varies a lot from plant to plant, so it's hard to predict how potent marijuana will be. Smoking delivers THC more quickly than eating it. A bong stops smoke it getting "lost" in the air but it burns hotter and destroys some of the THC.

There are more than 400 chemicals in marijuana. We don't understand all of them, but they include many of the same cancer causing tars as tobacco. Smoking marijuana can deliver three times more tar into the lungs than tobacco and more and more pot users are developing lung and other cancers.

### How does marijuana work?

The smoke from marijuana carries THC into the lungs, through the tissues of the lung wall and into the bloodstream. From there it goes directly to the brain and is absorbed into the fat molecules which make up the brain's cellular membranes. THC and the other cannabinoids remain dissolved in the fatty tissues of the brain as well as in the liver, kidneys, lungs and glands, including the sex organs (testes and ovaries). It takes weeks for them to slowly dissolve back into the bloodstream, which can lead to users being effected without knowing it.

In the brain, the THC molecules bind with specific receptors, causing the information processing system to become distorted. It effects the parts of the brain to do with balance, glucose craving, the perception of time, sound and colour. That's why time seems to pass differently when you are stoned, and sounds, colours and images are magnified, changed or distorted. It also explains why people get "the munchies".

### Is marijuana addictive?

The "high" which marijuana produces is caused by THC acting on brain receptors which carry messages between nerve cells to regulate our senses, thoughts and feelings. Regular or long term use causes these cells to *adapt* to THC, leading to tolerance, meaning users can need larger (or stronger) doses to get high and have withdrawals when they stop or reduce the amount suddenly. So it *is* physically addictive. Users also develop psychological dependence, which is even harder to break than physical addiction.

### Is marijuana a dangerous drug?

It's a risky drug. It effects your judgment and alters your sense of time and distance,

## Marijuana delivers up to 3 times more cancer-causing tars into the lungs than tobacco

It is *not* a good idea to smoke if you are pregnant or planning to have a baby. There is good evidence that heavy use damages genes which could lead to miscarriages or genetic faults in children. While it's useless as a contraceptive, it still reduces the number and motility of sperm in men and can interfere with ovulation in women.

Regular marijuana reduces your ability to concentrate and recall information. THC is easily absorbed by the part of the brain where short term memory is processed (the hippocampus). That makes learning difficult. If you feel you can only work or study properly when you are using you may be having withdrawals. That can take up to 6 weeks to pass. In some cases, stress is the problem and work or study will improve with stress reduction techniques. A number of studies suggest that marijuana can reduce the ability of the body to fight infection.

### **M**arijuana and Other Drugs.

By itself, marijuana is pretty complicated, but apart from motor car and drowning accidents, there are no records of anyone dying just because they used THC. Taken with other drugs it is a lot more dangerous. The effects are unpredictable and can lead to an overdose by multiplying the effect of some drugs and changing the effects of others.

**THC & Alcohol** ~ Both lower the blood pressure and both effect your balance and judgment. When you drink *and*

smoke pot, the combination is more than the sum of the drugs you have in your body. Alcohol acts like an anaesthetic; too much will even stop your breathing reflex and your heartbeat. Before getting to that stage, most people will have got rid of a lot of alcohol by throwing up. But THC prevents vomiting (one of the reasons it is sometimes used by cancer patients on chemotherapy), and this can lead to alcoholic poisoning and even death. It's not as rare as you might think. Similar problems occur with other drugs which depress the body's nervous system, including heroin, sleeping tablets and Valium-type drugs.

**THC & Stimulants** ~ Speed, cocaine, XTC and other drugs have some effects which are similar to marijuana and some which are opposite. Marijuana can also raise the heart rate from 70 beats per minute up to 100 or more. Beating that fast, the heart needs extra oxygen, but marijuana replaces a lot of the oxygen in the bloodstream with poisonous carbon monoxide. Drugs like Speed also increase the heart rate, and they make it irregular and inefficient. Taken in combination with cocaine or speed THC can make the heart race out of control and push your blood pressure high enough to cause a stroke.

### **P**sychiatric Medication & Pot

Many people say that marijuana relieves unpleasant side effects of medication, especially muscle stiffness and shakes. That is true: it is an *anticholinergic* drug like

the side-effect medications Cogentin and Artane.

But if you take these drugs *and* smoke pot, you may overdose, causing confusion, disorientation and severe physical effects ~ an *anticholinergic psychosis*. People have died from it.

Side effect pills can also cause dry mouth, red, itchy eyes and tremor, which gets worse if you use pot.

Some people blame their medication for making them depressed or bored. Pot is not the best way to handle this: marijuana users end up in hospital for depression and suicidal thoughts more often than nonusers who have mental problems. You're better off negotiating with your doctor about your medication.

THC and medications for mental illness bind to the same nerve receptors which is why THC stops your medications working properly, leading to higher doses and worse side effects.

It's a fact that some people find smoking pot pleasant. If it becomes your main social occupation it will be hard to get into other activities, make plans and follow through on them, especially if everyone you know is using. It's worth the effort though. Counseling and support may help you find new interests.

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