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"Questions About Marihuana"

from

A Federal Source Book:

Answers to the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Drug Abuse

WHAT IS MARIHUANA?

Marihuana is Indian hemp (Cannabis sativa). The parts with the highest tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content are the flowering tops of the plant. The leaves have a smaller amount. The stalks and seeds have little or none. THC is believed to be the active ingredient in marihuana. Many other compounds are present in marihuana, but they do not produce the mental effects of the drug.

DOES MARIHUANA VARY IN STRENGTH?

Yes. Some marihuana may produce no effect whatsoever. A small amount of strong marihuana may produce marked effects. The THC content of the plant determines its mind-altering activity, and this varies from none to more than 2 percent THC. Because THC is somewhat unstable, its content in marihuana decreases as time passes.

The plant that grows wild in the United States is low in THC content compared to cultivated marihuana, or the Mexican, Lebanese, or Indian varieties. Climate, soil conditions, the time of harvesting and other factors determine the potency.

WHAT IS HASHISH?

Hashish (hash) is the dark brown resin that is collected from the tops of potent Cannabis sativa. It is at least five times stronger than marihuana. Since it is stronger, the effect on the user is naturally more intense, and the possibility of side effects is greater.

IS MARIHUANA AN ADDICTING DRUG?

Marihuana does not lead to physical dependence. Therefore, it cannot be considered addicting. Chronic users become psychologically dependent upon the effects of marihuana. Thus, it is classified as habituating. The fact that a drug is not addicting has little relationship to its potential for harm, since dependence, whether psychological or physical, is a serious matter.

IS MARIHUANA A STIMULANT OR A DEPRESSANT?

Because it affects the individual's self control, the effects of marihuana vary so widely that it can be either a stimulant or a depressant. THC is a strong hallucinogen with some sedative properties. Occasionally, a person intoxicated with marihuana will become stimulated and overactive.

HOW IS MARIHUANA USED?

In this country, it is generally smoked in self-rolled cigarettes called "joints." It is also smoked in ordinary pipes or water pipes. Marihuana and hashish can also be added to foods or drinks.

WHAT ARE THE IMMEDIATE PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF SMOKING A MARIHUANA CIGARETTE?

Reddening of the whites of the eyes, an increased heart rate, and a cough due to the irritating effect of the smoke on the lungs are the most frequent and consistent physical effects. Hunger or sleepiness are reported by some individuals.

HOW LONG DO THE EFFECTS OF MARIHUANA LAST?

This depends upon the dose and the person. A few inhalations of strong marihuana can intoxicate a person for several hours. Weak marihuana will produce minimal effects for a short period of time. When a large amount is swallowed, the effects start later but persist longer than when the same quantity is smoked.

HOW DOES MARIHUANA WORK IN THE BRAIN?

This is not known. Studies attempting to clarify the question are underway.

DOES THE INDIVIDUAL'S TOLERANCE TO MARIHUANA VARY WITH REPEATED USE?

The development of tolerance to marihuana does not occur. Some people speak of "reverse tolerance." By that they mean that a person may require less marihuana in order to reach a specific "high." This is basically a matter of learning how to smoke the drug, and of learning what effects to look for.

DO HEAVY USERS SUFFER PHYSICAL WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS LIKE THE NARCOTIC ADDICT?

No. Sudden withdrawal may provoke restlessness and anxiety in a few persons who daily smoke large amounts of hashish, but true withdrawal symptoms as seen in the heroin addict do not develop.

WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF EXTENDED MARIHUANA USE?

These are not precisely known. Extensive scientific research is underway to answer this most important question.

WHAT ARE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF MARIHUANA?

The psychological effects of marihuana are variable. They include distortions of hearing, vision and sense of time. Thought becomes dream-like. The belief that one is thinking better is not unusual. Performance may be hampered or unchanged. Illusions (mininterpretation of sensations) are often reported, but hallucination (experiencing non-existent sensations) and delusions (false beliefs) are rare. Unfounded suspicion may occur, and this may be accompanied by anxiety. More often the feeling is one of a passive euphoria of "high." The individual tends to withdraw into himself. Occasionally, uncontrollable laughter or crying may occur.

WHAT KINDS OF EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS CAN THE MARIHUANA USER HAVE?

Anxiety reactions and panic states have been noted. Accidents have occurred due to impaired judgment and time-space distortions. The user, especially if he is inexperienced, may become excessively suspicious of people and take action that leads to injury. A toxic psychosis consisting of mental confusion, loss of contact with reality, and memory disturbances has been recorded.

The effects of prolonged use are not scientifically known. In those countries where cannabis use has been traditional, excessive amounts are claimed to induce loss of motivation, apathy, memory difficulties and loss of mental acuity. Reports of psychotic breakdowns from the extended use of marihuana are frequently found in the medical literature of the Near and Middle East, but these require further scientific investigation.

DOES THE HEAVY USE OF MARIHUANA AFFECT THE PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT OF THE YOUNG PERSON?

It can. By making marihuana use a career, the young person avoids normal life stresses and the problems that are an intrinsic part of growing up. He therefore misses the opportunity to mature to his full physical and mental potential. In addition, the developing personality is known to be susceptible to the effects of all mind-altering substances.

DOES MARIHUANA LEAD TO INCREASED SEXUAL ACTIVITY?

Marihuana has no known aphrodisiac property. At various times in the past, both promiscuity and impotence have been attributed to the use of marihuana without scientific basis for either allegation.

WHY DO PEOPLE CONTINUE TO USE MARIHUANA?

The consistent user, the "pothead," is likely to be emotionally disturbed, according to many studies of this group. He is using the drug to treat his personality problems.

HOW MUCH MARIHUANA IS BEING USED IN THIS COUNTRY?

The use of marihuana is increasing. In a recent nationwide survey, 4 percent of those queried responded affirmatively to the question, "Have you ever used marihuana?" That would mean that more than 8 million people have tried the drug. Twelve percent of the young people indicated that they have tried it. Exact statistics are difficult to obtain because of the legal penalties.

In college surveys, two-thirds of those who said that they had tried the drug did so less than a dozen times. Another quarter are occasional users, and the rest--less than 10 percent--may be considered daily or heavy users.

WHY ARE SO MANY ADOLESCENTS EXPERIMENTING WITH MARIHUANA NOW?

In part this is because marihuana is "in." Peer group pressures have led many to try "pot." Some use it as an act of defiance. Some are curious. While most adolescents do not continue using the drug, 5 to 10 percent become heavy, daily users.

HOW ARE TEENAGERS INTRODUCED TO MARIHUANA?

In general, adolescents are introduced to marihuana by others in their group. There is little evidence to confirm the belief that "pushers" need to "turn on" a novice. His "friends" do it for him.

Heavy marihuana users may go on to more dangerous drugs as a result of group pressures or of their own volition. Occasionally, a "pusher" will persuade the buyer to try a more dangerous drug.

HOW DOES MARIHUANA GET ONTO THE BLACK MARKET?

Although truckload lots are sometimes detected, most marihuana smuggling and sales are small-time operations of a few pounds or less. Organized criminal syndicates have not been involved to date. About 80 percent of the marihuana comes in from Mexico. The rest is acquired locally. Hashish is made in the Near East and is smuggled into the U. S. Young people themselves account for most acquisition and sales, according to the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARIHUANA AND CRIMINAL OR VIOLENT BEHAVIOR?

Any drug that loosens self-control may contribute to criminal behavior. Persons under the influence of marihuana tend to be passive, although some crimes have been committed by persons while they were "high." The personality of the user is as important as the type of drug in determining whether chemical substances lead to criminal or violent behavior.

CAN ONE SMOKE A LITTLE MARIHUANA, EQUIVALENT TO A DRINK OF ALCOHOL, AND NOT BECOME INTOXICATED?

Some people familiar with the drug are able to control its effects to permit only a feeling of relaxation. However, the usual intent of the user is to become "stoned." As a rule, either no effect or an intoxicating effect is obtained from the use of marihuana.

IS MARIHUANA LESS HARMFUL THAN ALCOHOL?

The results of intoxication by both drugs can be harmful.

We know that alcohol is a dangerous drug physically, psychologically or socially for millions of people. There is no firm evidence that marihuana would be less harmful if used consistently. In countries where alcohol is forbidden by religious taboo, skid rows based on marihuana exist. The "rumhead" and the "pothead" are both unenviable creatures.

IF ALCOHOL IS LEGAL, WHY NOT MARIHUANA?

It would seem more logical to deal with our millions of alcoholics than to add another mind-altering chemical to our existing problem. Whether another intoxicant should be accepted into the culture is the question.

Only during the past 3 years has the sophisticated, scientific study of marihuana been underway. It would seem prudent to await the results of ongoing and planned studies before treating marihuana as we do alcohol.

DOES MARIHUANA HAVE ANY MEDICAL USES?

Marihuana has no approved medical use in the U. S. Some researchers are attempting to determine whether THC may have appetite-enhancing, anticonvulsant, or antidepressant capabilities.

WHAT RESEARCH IS BEING DONE ON MARIHUANA?

A considerable amount of research with marihuana and THC is underway or planned. These investigations will help provide answers to many questions about the drug.

With the recent availability of synthetic THC and the ability to determine the amount of THC in marihuana, it is now feasible to know the exact quality of the substance being studied. This permits precise analysis that was not possible before in such ways as the following:

1. An examination of the changes that occur in the body when marihuana is smoked, as well as the observation of the metabolic changes that take place in THC.
2. The labelling of THC with radioactive material in order to learn the distribution and excretion of the drug.
3. The effect of marihuana on the chemical components of the brain and other tissues.
4. A testing of the acute and chronic toxicity of marihuana.
5. Research to discover the physiological and psychological changes in man caused by varying doses of marihuana. This ranges from studying brain-wave patterns to testing a subject's ability to perform complex tasks.
6. An examination of the effects of THC and other marihuana components upon chromosomes.

To determine the effects of the long-term use of marihuana more accurately, negotiations are now underway with qualified scientists in countries where the use of the drug has been customary for years. Groups of long-term, daily users will be compared with matched groups of non-users. The results of physical and psychological examinations will be studied for the two groups.

IS THERE ANYTHING IN MARIHUANA THAT LEADS TO THE USE OF OTHER DRUGS?

There is nothing in marihuana itself that produced a need to use other drugs. Most marihuana smokers do not progress to stronger substances. Some do. Surveys supported by the National Institute of Mental Health show that the "pothead" does tend to experiment with other drugs. Hashish is frequently tried, and large numbers of "potheads" later use strong hallucinogens, amphetamines, and, occasionally,

barbiturates, Some try opium and heroin.

In one college survey, 1 percent of the "potheads" became addicted to opium or heroin. In surveys of heroin addicts, 35 percent had previously tried marihuana, but a still larger percentage had used alcohol before heroin.

It appears that the person who becomes seriously overinvolved with any drug is likely to have the emotional need to seek other kinds of drugs and to try them repetitively.