NO PREP

Marijuana and Teens

Risks, Laws, and Mental Health

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Marijuana and Teens: Risks, Laws, and Mental Health

What is Marijuana?

Marijuana, often referred to as cannabis, is a plant containing THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the main psychoactive compound. It's used in various forms, including dried leaves for smoking, edibles, and oils or tinctures. Some teens might see it as a relatively harmless drug—especially as it becomes legal for adult recreational or medicinal use in certain states. However, legality and safety are not synonymous. Marijuana can impair reaction time, memory, and coordination, all of which are critical for teens still developing their cognitive abilities.

Short- and Long-Term Effects on Memory and Learning

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Short- and Long-Term Effects on Memory and Learning

The immediate effects of marijuana can include distorted perception and short-term memory loss. In a high school context, even occasional use could interfere with the ability to study or retain information. Over the long term, heavy marijuana use has been associated with declines in IQ, motivation, and overall academic achievement. This is particularly concerning for teens, whose brains are actively forming new neural connections. Marijuana can disrupt these processes, potentially affecting mental sharpness and learning capacity.

Effects on Teen Brain Development

During adolescence, the brain is still refining pathways that govern emotional regulation, decision-making, and impulse control. THC can alter the balance of neurotransmitters, leading to changes in mood, behavior, and sometimes even brain structure. Though not everyone who smokes marijuana will experience severe consequences, the risk is notably higher for younger users. Some teens who use marijuana frequently show symptoms of anxiety, depression, and may have a higher tendency toward addictive behaviors. Understanding these risks is vital:

experimenting with marijuana at 15 can have different implications compared to an adult in their late 20s.

Legal Confusion: State vs. Federal Laws

In some states, marijuana is permitted for medicinal or even recreational use for adults over a certain age. Federal law, however, tells a different story. The federal government sorts controlled substances into schedules, with Schedule I the strictest, and where marijuana sits in that system has been changing in recent years: medical products and adult recreational use are no longer treated the same way. Either way, it stays illegal for teens. For teens, this legal patchwork can be confusing. Even if it's legal for adults in their state, underage possession or use is typically not allowed. Being caught with marijuana can lead to school suspensions, legal charges, or future limitations on college financial aid and job opportunities. It's essential for teens to understand their local laws and the potential legal repercussions.

Link to Anxiety and Depression

While some users claim marijuana helps them relax or cope with stress, heavy or prolonged use can exacerbate mental health challenges. Research indicates a link between chronic marijuana use and the onset or worsening of anxiety and depression. It can create a cycle where someone uses marijuana to feel better momentarily, only to find their underlying mood issues intensify over time. For teens already dealing with social pressures, academic stress, or emotional upheavals, adding a substance that can cloud judgment and elevate negative feelings can be particularly risky.

Key Information: Helpful Snapshot: Marijuana Facts

Factor	Teen Impact
Memory & Learning	Impaired short-term recall, reduced motivation
Brain Development	Can alter emotional regulation and impulse control
Legal Risks	Underage possession remains illegal; can impact future opportunities

Factor	Teen Impact
Mental Health	Potential to worsen anxiety, depression, and addictive tendencies

Case Study Excerpt

When Jaylen moved to a new school district, he felt out of place and anxious about making friends. One afternoon, a group of classmates invited him to hang out. When they pulled out a joint, Jaylen hesitated but decided he wanted to fit in, so he took a few puffs. At first, he didn't notice much, just a slight lightheadedness. Over time, Jaylen found himself using marijuana more often, thinking it was helping him cope with stress. He even convinced himself it was harmless because some states had legalized it for adults. Soon, Jaylen's grades plummeted. He couldn't focus on homework, and once-sharp memories of class lectures faded. He began to feel uneasy and restless whenever he wasn't high. His anxiety worsened, morphing into occasional panic attacks, especially if he went too long without smoking. When a teacher caught him smelling like marijuana, Jaylen was suspended. That suspension meant he couldn't participate in the upcoming basketball playoffs—a sport he dearly loved. Concerned and disappointed, his parents arranged therapy. There, Jaylen learned how his desire to fit in led him to self-medicate instead of addressing his anxiety in healthier ways. He was startled to discover that what he thought was a 'natural stress reliever' was actually fueling a cycle of poor academic performance and mounting anxiety.

1. What initial reasons did Jaylen have for trying marijuana, and how did that choice backfire?

2. In what ways did marijuana use affect Jaylen's mental health and academic life?

Multiple Choice

1. How does marijuana primarily affect short-term brain function?

    a) It slows reaction time and impairs memory

    b) It makes people stronger

    c) It enhances mental clarity and strengthens memory retention

    d) It guarantees calmness and relaxation

2. Which of the following is true regarding the legal status of marijuana in the U.S.?

    a) It is legal for teens everywhere

    b) There are no penalties for teens caught with it in a legal state

    c) It is illegal federally, though some states allow adult use

    d) It is always treated like a prescription drug

3. A significant concern for teen marijuana users is:

    a) Perfect attendance

    b) Possible worsening of anxiety or depression

    c) Improved academic performance and higher scores on classroom tests

    d) Guaranteed social acceptance

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ THC	A) A form of marijuana consumed through food or drink
2. ___ Schedule I	B) The main psychoactive compound in marijuana
3. ___ Anxiety	C) The strictest federal drug category, for substances with no accepted medical use
4. ___ Edible	D) Mood disorder marked by persistent sadness, hopelessness, and low energy
5. ___ Depression	E) Feeling of worry or fear that can be heightened by substance use

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. _____ is the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana responsible for its mind-altering effects.

2. Even in states where marijuana is legal for adults, it remains _____ for teens.

3. Marijuana can impair _____ function, leading to poor academic performance.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why might teens incorrectly believe marijuana is harmless if it's legal in some states?

_____

_____

_____

2. How can heavy marijuana use create a cycle of increased anxiety or depression?

3. What are some healthy strategies a teen can use instead of marijuana to deal with stress?