

Medical Marijuana Benefits - Risks

Medical marijuana is a pharmaceutical that can help with the side effects of many medical conditions, including cancer, HIV/AIDs, multiple sclerosis, glaucoma. It can also be used to treat the debilitating symptoms of many medical conditions such as chronic pain. Like all medicines, medical marijuana may cause certain side effects.

The most commonly reported effects of smoked marijuana are a sense of well-being or euphoria and increased talkativeness and laughter alternating with periods of introspective dreaminess followed by lethargy and sleepiness

A characteristic feature of a cannabis “high” is a distortion in the sense of time associated with deficits in short-term memory and learning. A marijuana smoker typically has a sense of enhanced physical and emotional sensitivity, including a feeling of greater interpersonal closeness.

The “high” associated with marijuana is not generally claimed to be integral to its therapeutic value. But mood enhancement, anxiety reduction, and mild sedation can be desirable qualities in medications, particularly for patients suffering pain and anxiety. Thus, although the psychological effects of marijuana are merely side effects in the treatment of some symptoms, they may contribute directly to relief of other symptoms.

Effects of cannabis generally range from 10 minutes to 8 hours, depending on the potency of the dose, method of delivery, and personal tolerance to the drug's various effects. When smoked or vaporized, for example, the short-term effects of cannabis are apparent within a few minutes and may last for 1-3 hours. The duration of noticeable effects has also been observed to diminish with repeated use and a tolerance may develop.

Potential medical benefits

Compounds in marijuana can relieve pain, combat nausea and stimulate appetite. It had been shown to help reduce nausea and vomiting and stimulate appetite during chemotherapy. It has been suggested to be beneficial in the treatment of patients with AIDS, ALS, Crohn’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, glaucoma, Hepatitis C, multiple sclerosis and may reduce pain in certain chronic medical conditions. Its benefits have also been suggested in other chronic diseases including arthritis, PTSD, and Alzheimer’s.

Medical Marijuana, however, has also been shown to have short and long-term side effects. There are known and unknown side effects and certain risks in the use of medical marijuana.

Cannabis short-term side effects

Short-term Cannabis side effects include:

Most common:

- Anxiety
- Paranoia

Individuals may also have:

- memory and learning problems
- distorted perception
- panic
- sensory distortion
- difficulty thinking
- delusions
- difficulty solving problems.
- anxiety
- poor coordination of movement
- lowered reaction time
- increased heartbeat
- hallucinations
- depersonalization

The more severe side effects usually occur in inexperienced users after large doses and disappear within hours. As many as 17% of regular marijuana smokers report experiencing at least one of these symptoms

Cannabis long-term side effects

Long term side effects of regular Cannabis use include:

- lung disease
- chronic cough
- mucus
- nasal congestion
- lack of motivation
- decrease in sexual desire
- weight gain
- increased risk of cancer including testicular, lung and bladder cancer
- psychosis or schizophrenia
- cognitive impairment
- chronic bronchitis
- personality and mood changes
- reduced resistance to common illnesses (colds, bronchitis, etc.)
- potential suppression of the immune system
- reduction of male sex hormones
- reduced sexual capacity
- study difficulties: reduced ability to learn and retain information
- apathy, drowsiness, lack of motivation
- inability to understand things clearly

Lung Disease

Studies suggest smoking and the carcinogens inhaled in the smoke may be cancer causing. Cannabis may also be expected to harm the airways as its smoke contains twice the level of carcinogens compared with tobacco cigarettes. The method of smoking also increases the risk. “Joints” are typically smoked without a proper filter and almost to the very tip, which increases the amount of smoke inhaled. The Cannabis smoker tends to inhale more deeply and for longer periods of time, facilitating the deposition of carcinogens in the airways. Cannabis smoke exposes users to carbon monoxide. Users of cannabis who vaporize the drug may have fewer lung symptoms than those who smoke it.

Psychosis

Cannabis use may be linked to the development of psychotic symptoms. Heavy pot smoking as a teenager or young adult raises the risk of having psychotic symptoms later in life.

Cell damage

Cannabis smoke causes significantly more damage to cells and DNA than tobacco smoke.

Heart attacks

Cannabis users appear to have a shorter life expectancy after suffering a heart attack. Cannabis triggers a spike in resting heart rate, as well an increase in blood pressure.

Impotence or erectile dysfunction

Regular users may notice difficulty in maintaining an erection. A short time after stopping regular use, erectile function can return to normal.

Pregnancy

Women who smoke Cannabis during pregnancy may impair their baby's growth and development in the womb. Regular use of cannabis throughout pregnancy may be associated with a small decrease in birth weight.

Sense of smell

Regular users have a decreased sense of smell which may return a few weeks after stopping use.

Cannabis withdrawal

Repeated Cannabis use may induce a withdrawal syndrome, characterized irritability, anxiety, craving, decreased quality and quantity of sleep, and decreased food intake.

Fertility

The likelihood of a good outcome of fertility treatment is reduced if either the man or the woman uses Cannabis. Couples should not use Cannabis for at least six months before starting fertility treatment.

Effects on driving

Cannabis usage has been shown to negatively affect the ability to drive. Drivers who consume cannabis within three hours of driving are nearly twice as likely to cause a vehicle collision as those who are not under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The effects of cannabis on laboratory-based tasks show clear impairment with respect to tracking ability, attention, and other tasks depending on the dose administered.

Alcohol

Using marijuana while under the influence of alcohol is not recommended under any circumstance. Additional side effects may become present when using both alcohol and marijuana. Cannabis should be treated as an open container of alcohol and may subject one to arrest.