

Drug Facts: Marijuana Revised December 2012

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Marijuana is a dry, shredded green and brown mix of leaves, flowers, stems, and seeds from the hemp plant *Cannabis sativa*. In a more concentrated, resinous form, it is called hashish, and as a sticky black liquid, hash oil. The main psychoactive (mind-altering) chemical in marijuana is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC.

Marijuana is the most common illicit drug used in the United States. After a period of decline in the last decade, its use has generally increased among young people since 2007, corresponding to a diminishing perception of the drug's risks. More teenagers are now current (past-month) smokers of marijuana than of cigarettes, according to annual survey data.

How is Marijuana Abused?

Marijuana is usually smoked in hand-rolled cigarettes (joints) or in pipes or water pipes (bongs). It is also smoked in blunts—cigars that have been emptied of tobacco and refilled with a mixture of marijuana and tobacco. Marijuana smoke has a pungent and distinctive, usually sweet-and-sour, odor. Marijuana can also be mixed in food or brewed as a tea.

How Does Marijuana Affect the Brain?

When marijuana is smoked, THC rapidly passes from the lungs into the bloodstream, which carries the chemical to the brain and other organs throughout the body. It is absorbed more slowly when ingested in food or drink.

However it is ingested, THC acts upon specific molecular targets on brain cells, called cannabinoid receptors. These receptors are ordinarily activated by chemicals similar to THC called endocannabinoids, such as anandamide. These are naturally occurring in the body and are part of a neural communication network (the endocannabinoid system) that plays an important role in normal brain development and function.

Effects on Life

Research clearly demonstrates that marijuana has the potential to cause problems in daily life or make a person's existing problems worse. In fact, heavy marijuana users generally report lower life satisfaction, poorer mental and physical health, relationship problems, and less academic and career success compared to their peers who came from similar backgrounds. For example, marijuana use is associated with a higher likelihood of dropping out from school. Several studies also associate workers' marijuana smoking with increased absences, tardiness, accidents, workers' compensation claims, and job turnover.