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## It's Legal but Is It Harmful? Marijuana Education Needs a Major Boost

Avi Kiel

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# It's legal but is it harmful? Marijuana education needs a major boost.

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Throughout the country, states are changing their marijuana laws at a dizzying pace.[1] New York legalized recreational marijuana for those over 21 in March 2021, positioning itself to become one of the largest markets of legal cannabis in the nation.[2] Missouri citizens voted to legalize recreational marijuana in November 2022,[3] Minnesota became the 23rd state to legalize recreational marijuana in May 2023,[4] and Ohio citizens will vote this November whether the state should follow this strong trend.[5] It seems like Pennsylvania is on track to permit adult-use cannabis, with Democrats taking control of the state legislature and Governor Shapiro signaling support.[6] While marijuana is illegal at the federal level, there have been strong attempts to decriminalize it.[7] The rapidly changing cannabis legal landscape coincides with a burst in public support for legalization.[8]

Despite the flurry of legalization, marijuana use can pose serious health risks, particularly because today's marijuana is more potent than in the past.[9] The number of people in their twenties or early thirties suffering heart attacks has been rising in recent years.[10] Marijuana can lead to increased blood pressure, which is a heart attack risk factor.[11] It can also lead to a higher risk of stroke in young adults.[12] Marijuana can affect one's mental health, leaving them feeling anxious, afraid, and panicked.[13] It can also cause impaired thinking and interfere with learning, driving, playing sports, and brain development.[14] The American Automobile Association (AAA) opposes legalization of recreational marijuana given concerns of marijuana's effects on drivers and traffic safety.[15] Smoked marijuana has many of the same harmful components as tobacco smoke and can harm lung tissues and damage small blood vessels.[16] Those who "frequently use large amounts" of marijuana report lower life satisfaction, poorer mental and physical health, and less academic and career success compared to those who do not.[17] One study found that "approximately 3 in 10 people who use marijuana" have marijuana use disorder, which means that they cannot stop using marijuana even if it is "causing health and social problems in their lives." [18] Users may have higher amounts of lead in their bodies.[19] Accordingly, "[m]arijuana use comes with real risks that can impact a person's health and life." [20]

There is "a concerning gap between public perception and scientific evidence on the risks and benefits of cannabis." [21] While more than half of U.S. adults realize the dangers of cannabis, the majority of recent cannabis users feel that there is no risk from smoking cannabis daily.[22] In a 2021 survey, 44% of people thought that it was safer to smoke a cannabis joint rather than a cigarette daily despite experts saying that cannabis smoke might be just as harmful.[23] Studies indicate a steady decline in cannabis risk perceptions in recent years.[24] The

prevalence of perceiving marijuana use as low-risk doubled from 2002 to 2018.[25] Social media, the internet, the cannabis industry, and peers can promote exaggerated beliefs about the health benefits of cannabis.[26] A recent study found that a reasonable number of people believed that cannabis could prevent or cure cancer despite insufficient evidence suggesting as much.[27] The study's findings indicated that false beliefs about the medical benefits of cannabis are common.[28] Today's teens are growing up hearing mixed messages about marijuana and many of them think that it is safe.[29]

While states move swiftly toward cannabis legalization, it is essential to educate the public of its risks and benefits.[30] It is critical to train healthcare workers and medical students about marijuana's health implications.[31] Yet there is much work to be done.[32] A 2016 survey found that 85% percent of surveyed residents and fellows reported having no education about medical marijuana.[33] Other studies indicated that practicing physicians have a limited understanding about cannabis' health effects and would like more training.[34] The regular population can benefit from marijuana education since their knowledge of its health effects is relatively low.[35] Recent users of marijuana are more susceptible to having a false perception of its consequences and it is important to teach them about its potential harms.[36] Educating people about the danger of marijuana is an effective way of reducing its use and future impact.[37]

The dearth of marijuana education is rectifiable. Parents can play an important role in educating children about marijuana and preventing its use.[38] Medical students should be offered coursework that examines the biochemical effects of cannabis and its clinical relevance.[39] Practicing physicians should have access to the same information through continuing medical education (CME).[40] Marijuana labels should become standardized and inform consumers how to use the product safely and of potential health risks.[41] Governments should implement public education campaigns by targeting frequent consumers using innovative outreach such as interactive tools and games. [42] Policymakers should study how to craft cannabis laws that prioritize public health and protect youth.[43] Marijuana is here to stay, and it is imperative to educate the public accordingly.

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[6] Mark O’Keefe, *Is this the Year that Pa. Finally Legalizes Recreational Marijuana?*, Pa. Cap.-Star (Feb. 19, 2023, 6:30 AM), <https://www.penncapital-star.com/commentary/is-this-the-year-that-pa-finally-legalizes-recreational-marijuana-mark-okeefe/>.

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