Moderate marijuana use and health effects? [1]

Dear Alice,

Just how dangerous is light to moderate use of marijuana (one joint per week)? I have heard that it is less dangerous than alcohol or tobacco use. Also, its metabolites are stored in fatty tissues, but do they cause any harm?

Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Take a deep breath. Well, you may want to read this first. Marijuana (a.k.a., weed, pot, grass, herb, bhang, dope, reefer) contains at least 60 chemicals called cannabinoids, one of which – THC – is mainly responsible for the mind-altering effects of marijuana. After smoking marijuana, at least 80 THC metabolites are stored in fatty tissue in the body for about three to five days (for heavy users, this can be longer). It is currently unknown what these metabolites do in the body, but the fact that they stay ? and build up ? raises some concern for long-term health risks of even moderate marijuana use.

When THC and other cannabinoids attach to CB1 and CB2 receptors (specific cells in the brain and body), they affect the functioning of these receptors. Although occasional marijuana smokers are less likely to experience ongoing problems as a result of marijuana compared with heavy and longtime users, short-term and long-term health risks can include:

- Impaired thinking, problem-solving, memory
- Decreased sperm counts in some men
- Erectile dysfunction in some men
- Irregular menstrual cycles in some women
- Poor coordination and balance
- Elevated risk of cardiovascular disease
- Ongoing cough
- More frequent respiratory infections
- Hallucinations
- Withdrawal symptoms
- Gynecomastia (development of breast tissue in men) after long-term use

As far as being less dangerous than alcohol, check out Alcohol vs. Marijuana: Which is safer? [2]
Safer than tobacco? You may want to read Marijuana: Does it cause cancer? Keep in mind that using alcohol and tobacco is legal across the U.S., but marijuana is not.

Some people who are very concerned about the health risks of marijuana decide to avoid it altogether. Others accept they are taking on a certain amount of risk (health, legal, and otherwise), even from smoking occasionally. The decision is up to you, being informed is certainly a good first step.

Related questions

- Marijuana and driving
- Marijuana: Certain methods of smoking healthier than others?
- Marijuana ? Does it produce serotonin?
- Marijuana and birth control pills
- Eating marijuana
- Smoking marijuana for essential tremor disorder?

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