Dear Alice,

I typically don't smoke that much weed, especially during the school year. Last year, for instance, I smoked maybe once a month. This summer, though, my friends and I have all hit the bong pretty hard. I'm worried such frequency over a few months could impair my long-term capacity for learning. Is there any salt to this concern?

Thanks,
Smokin' too much

Answer

Dear Smokin' too much,

Your concern does carry some weight— heavy pot smoking over an extended period of time is associated with some pretty gnarly cognitive impairments, including memory, retention, and learning deficits. However, for recreational users who haven't logged too many years at the bong, it may be more important to pay attention to the short-term effects of being stoned, and how your decision to get high affects your daily life.

The effective ingredient in marijuana is THC, which rapidly moves from the lungs to the bloodstream when you smoke marijuana. THC acts on specific sites in the brain, called cannabinoid receptors, setting off a string of reactions that ultimately lead to the cannabis high. Most cannabinoid receptors are in the parts of the brain that regulate pleasure, memory, thoughts, concentration, sensory and time perception, and coordinated movement. Not surprisingly then, pot smoking can cause distorted perceptions, impaired coordination, and changes to your focus and perception of your surroundings (i.e., paranoia or giddiness).

When it comes to cognitive impairment from pot smoking, duration of use proves to be an influential factor. Undeniably when you're high as a kite, you may experience the sensations and distortions of marijuana intoxication, but it may take at least a decade of heavy use to see permanent impairments. In studies of people who smoked heavily for ten and 24 years, neurological deficits from too much weed were pronounced. This pot smoking cohort performed significantly worse on tests of memory and attention. Long-term users also showed cognitive impairments on tests of verbal memory, verbal learning, and retention and retrieval of learned information.

These studies demonstrate that pot is a potent substance, correlated with significant brain-frying when used frequently over years or decades. A summer of heavy bong hitting shouldn't
lead to these cognitive impairments overnight, but it may be a good idea to think about the short term effects of lots of pot smoking while you're in school. Weed doesn't have to cause severe problems in your brain to impact your daily life. Getting high even infrequently still fogs your thinking, which may mean functioning at less than your best intellectually or clouding up the nuances of social interaction. You may want to ask yourself what attracts you to smoking pot. What is behind your decision to lay hard on the bong?

Some summertime recreation shouldn't change your cognitive abilities drastically, but it behooves you to have a healthy respect for what too much bud can do. Your mind is a powerful asset ? keeping it free and clear will let it take you to new heights.

Alice!
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