Marijuana made my heart pound

Dear Alice,

I recently smoked marijuana, and while I was stoned, my heart pounded rapidly. Is this a normal effect of the drug, an allergic reaction, or something else??

Answer

Dear Reader,

It’s hard to definitively determine what caused your heart to pound, but there are multiple possibilities. It might be that you experienced it as a common side effect of marijuana use. It’s also possible that your experience was due to feeling anxious, which could have been induced or exacerbated by marijuana use. Another reason for this is that your marijuana was laced with another substance which caused a sudden rapid heartbeat. Although allergic reactions to marijuana have been reported, a rapidly pounding heart hasn’t been one of the symptoms associated with this reaction. But regardless of what the cause is, a pounding heart isn’t something to be taken lightly. As such, if you have another similar experience, speaking with your health care provider can help determine the cause and help prevent future recurrences. Interested in ‘hashing’ this out more? Keep on reading!

Before skipping a beat, it may be helpful to know what happens to your body when you smoke marijuana. When smoked, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) can affect the body by inducing feelings of euphoria, heightening relaxation, increasing a person’s heart rate and blood pressure, altering senses and perceptions of time, or triggering anxiety, fear, or panic. However, it’s worth mentioning that not all ‘highs’ are experienced the same way, as side effects may vary from person to person. They may also differ depending on how much marijuana a person has smoked or eaten and the type of marijuana being used. It’s possible that you experienced a common side effect that others don’t or may not experience to the same degree (to learn more, check out Moderate marijuana use and health effects).

As alluded to earlier, the relationship between marijuana and anxiety can be complicated. Sometimes, people choose to use marijuana to help ease their anxiety. However, while marijuana helps some people relax, it may induce or exacerbate anxiety in others. For some people, the uncertainty surrounding their marijuana experience might cause them to develop symptoms of anxiety and panic attacks, such as a racing heart. For others with generalized anxiety disorder, marijuana may encourage negative thinking which can also worsen their symptoms and lead to a racing heart. As such, if you suspect or know you have anxiety and
are likely to experience similar uncomfortable reactions, you may choose to avoid using marijuana in the future.

While it's possible that the marijuana itself made your heart pound, it might also be that the marijuana you smoked was mixed with another drug. Sometimes, marijuana is cut with hallucinogens (such as PCP [5]) or other substances that may cause serious adverse effects. Some of these effects can include heart arrhythmia [6] (irregular heart beating), chest pains, sudden high blood pressure, and heart attack. Keep in mind that unless you get marijuana from a regulated dispensary, it can be hard to know what you're getting since there are many inconsistencies with drugs that aren't legalized.

Regardless, a rapidly-pounding heart is to which you'll want to pay attention. If you notice it happening under any other circumstances, especially if it begins to happen more frequently, speaking with your health care provider is strongly advised. Likewise, you may want to think about whether or not you're interested in continuing to smoke marijuana and weigh the pros and cons of doing so now that you know a bit more about what may have contributed to your experiences. If you're still interested in experiencing a "high" without the same risks to your health, you may want to read Natural highs [7] in the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol & Other Drugs [8] archives.

Alice!
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