Does smoking marijuana increase your metabolism? [1]

Dear Alice,

Is it true that your metabolism speeds up when you're high off pot? I heard that when you have the munchies after smoking marijuana, it doesn't matter what you eat because your metabolism is so fast. Please give me an answer!!

— Munchie Metabolism

Answer

Dear Munchie Metabolism,

You may want to sit back, get comfortable, and grab a (healthy) snack to munch, because the jury’s still out on this one! There hasn't been a definitive scientific verdict on whether marijuana affects your metabolism one way or the other. Some research on "endocannabinoids" — chemicals similar to marijuana, that your body naturally produces — has led researchers to think that blocking cannabinoids may decrease the chance of someone developing metabolic syndrome — which is a group of risk factors that can lead to heart disease, diabetes, and other possible health issues. Also, as you mentioned, one side-effect of using marijuana may be hunger. Gobbling up heaps of goodies (particularly ones that aren't supportive of a balanced diet [2]) when you get the Mary Jane munchies may have other less-than-ideal impacts on your health, beyond any effect on metabolism.

While one popular study did claim an association between marijuana use and weight loss, the findings have been disputed, and there have been several studies since showing that marijuana use may actually be associated with weight gain and the development of pre-diabetes. It's also possible that people believe marijuana can speed up metabolism because they’ve heard about the association between cigarette smoking and metabolism [3]. However, this does not seem to hold true for marijuana.

When you’re high, those sweet, salty, and fatty treats may appear to have a heavenly glow about them. In fact, research on endocannabinoids supports the explanation for "the munchies," too, and these appetite-stimulating effects of marijuana were documented as early as the year 300! Basically, the cannabinoid receptor system in your brain is thought to be involved in pleasure-
seeking behavior, sensitivity to smells, and a heightened response to sweet flavors — all things that could send you dashing to the pantry. Unfortunately, this same biological pathway might signal to your body to increase its fat storage and insulin production. This evidence has even been used as one of the arguments for the medical use of marijuana: for example, researchers have found that people living with HIV/AIDS who need to gain weight will typically eat more when they use cannabis.

While more research may be needed on marijuana and metabolism, what you eat still matters — under any circumstances and beyond just weight-related concerns. In fact, excess sugar in your diet [4] can lead to poor oral health, accelerated aging, and an increased risk of type II diabetes, even if you're not putting on pounds; excess salt [5] can lead to high blood pressure and osteoporosis; and too much fat [6] can increase risk of some cancers and heart disease. If you're worried about your munching habits, consider reading I'm bored, so I eat [7] in the Go Ask Alice! archives for tips on ways to reduce unnecessary snacking. Chatting with a registered dietician or health care provider about achieving a balanced diet and lifestyle may also help inform how to maintain a healthy weight.

All this to say, when it comes to marijuana and metabolism: if something seems too good to be true (like unlimited snacking without health consequences)... it might just be!

Alice!
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