

Marijuana Abuse and Dependence

What is marijuana abuse and dependence?

Marijuana is made from a plant called cannabis. It may be smoked or eaten. Hashish is a different form of marijuana, which is made by boiling down the plant until it is like tar. Spice, or K2, is an incense made from herbs that are sprayed with a chemical called THC, which is the same chemical found in marijuana.

Marijuana is sold illegally most of the time, but it is legal when used as a medicine. A healthcare provider can prescribe a pill form to treat:

- Nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy
- Weight loss from diseases such as HIV/AIDS

In some states, a healthcare provider can prescribe marijuana in other forms to treat severe pain or other disorders.

Abuse and dependence are patterns of using drugs that lead to serious personal, family and health problems. Abuse is when you keep taking the drug even though it causes a problem such as:

- Showing up late or missing work or school and not caring about things that used to matter to you
- Breaking rules or breaking the law
- Not keeping promises, arguing, or even getting violent with other people
- Doing things that are dangerous, such as driving while under the influence

You may be abusing prescription marijuana if you:

- Take it for reasons other than why it was prescribed
- Take more than the prescribed dose
- Continue to use it when you no longer have a need

If you continue to abuse drugs, you can become dependent. When you are dependent, you:

- Need to use more and more marijuana, or use it more often to get the same effects.
- Lose control, which means you keep using drugs even though you know that it is harmful to you or others, or you can't stop using drugs when you try
- Crave drugs so much that you spend a lot of time and energy getting drugs, using drugs, and getting over the effects
- Have withdrawal symptoms when you stop using marijuana

Dependence is also called addiction. Not everyone who uses prescription or illegal marijuana will become addicted. However, it is the most commonly abused drug in the US.

What is the cause?

Marijuana changes the way your body and brain work. When you use a lot of marijuana, your brain starts to get used to it. As a result, you think about marijuana all the time, you don't feel good unless you use marijuana, and you may act different when you use it. When you stop using marijuana suddenly, the balance of chemicals in your brain changes which causes the symptoms of withdrawal.

You have a higher risk of becoming dependent on drugs if you:

- Have a family history of drug or alcohol abuse
- Have abused alcohol or drugs in the past
- Are easily frustrated, have trouble dealing with stress, or feel like you aren't good enough
- Are regularly around people who use alcohol or drugs
- Have a mental health problem
- Have constant pain

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of marijuana abuse or dependence depend on how much and how often you use the drug. The symptoms can be mild to severe, such as:

- Having belly pain, nausea, or increased appetite
- Having trouble thinking, learning or remembering
- Seeing, hearing, or feeling something that is not there
- Thinking that others are out to get you when they are not

You may also have symptoms of new or worse health problems caused by marijuana use such as heart or lung problems.

The symptoms of marijuana withdrawal can be mild to severe. You may have some of these symptoms when you stop using marijuana:

- Feeling nervous and restless
- Losing your appetite
- Feeling depressed
- Cravings for marijuana
- Having trouble sleeping

Smoking marijuana while you are pregnant can harm your baby. Your baby may not grow normally. Your child can have more behavioral problems and problems with language, attention, and memory.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask how much and how often you use marijuana. Be honest about your drug use. Your provider needs this information to give you the right treatment. He will also ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. You may have blood or urine tests.

How is it treated?

Marijuana abuse and dependence can be treated. For any treatment to be successful, you must want to stop using marijuana. Do not try to use alcohol and other drugs to reduce withdrawal symptoms. Your healthcare provider may prescribe medicine to help you get through withdrawal.

If you are abusing or dependent on marijuana and want to quit, get help.

Support groups and therapy may be helpful. Your healthcare providers and counselors will work with you to develop a treatment program.

Recovery from dependence is a long-term process. Follow-up treatment is very important so that you don't go back to abusing drugs.

If you have overdosed, or are having severe withdrawal symptoms you will need to be treated in a hospital. You will also be treated for any health problems such as a heart attack, stroke, or other life-threatening problems.

How can I take care of myself?

The best way to help yourself is to see your healthcare provider and make plans to stop using marijuana. If you are already seeing a healthcare provider, it is important to take the full course of treatment he or she prescribes.

Get support. Talk with family and friends. Consider joining a support group in your area.

Learn to manage stress. Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax, for example take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.

Take care of your physical health. Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Don't use alcohol or drugs. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.

Avoid situations where people are likely to use alcohol or drugs.

Check your medicines. To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take.

Contact your healthcare provider or therapist if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

Keep trying. Many people try more than once to quit using marijuana before they finally succeed. So, never say, "I can't." You CAN learn to live without drugs in your daily life.

People and resources in your community that can help you include your healthcare providers, therapists, support groups, mental health centers, and alcohol or substance abuse treatment programs. You may want to contact:

- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
800-622-2255
<http://www.ncadd.org>

Developed by RelayHealth.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.