

Adult-use marijuana raises health risks for kids

By Sarah Music

Marijuana available today in Montana is nearly four times as potent as cannabis was 20 years ago. The higher content of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) in marijuana has increased marijuana-related emergency room visits.

Death from a marijuana overdose is rare. But emergency treatment may be needed for marijuana use symptoms that include sudden high blood pressure with a headache, chest pain and heart rhythm disturbances, extreme hyperactivity and physical violence, heart attack, seizures, stroke or cardiac arrest.

Teens and children are at especially high risk from high-potency marijuana. Nearly 35% of Yellowstone County high school teens have tried marijuana according to the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Marijuana is the most commonly used substance among Montana teens receiving treatment for drug use.

The risk of someone developing a marijuana use disorder (MUD) increases the younger someone starts using. This is because the human brain is not fully developed until age 25. Marijuana use causes chemical changes to the brain that could affect teens for the remainder of their lives. The effects may include loss of memory, difficulty concentrating, increased impulsivity and decreased ability to learn.

Marijuana use has been linked to depression, social anxiety and suicidal ideation. This is especially concerning with 10% of Yellowstone County teens expressing thoughts of suicide, according to the YRBS. High THC intake can also lead to temporary paranoia or schizophrenia. Inhaling marijuana by smoking or vaping increases risk of lung injuries, vascular problems and exposure to cancer-causing carcinogens.

Marijuana companies deliberately target teen consumers by designing edible products to mimic common candies or snacks. Oftentimes, these products will use the same name or mascot as some of teens' favorite foods.

There has been an increase in overdose incidents in children under the age of 12 who mistake "edible" marijuana for regular food items and eat them unknowingly. In children, symptoms of marijuana overdose could include poor balance, sleepiness, trouble breathing and becoming comatose.

If any adult-use marijuana products are kept in the home, they should be placed in a locked cabinet out of reach of young children who may live in or visit the home.

If you are a parent of a teen, educate yourself on the impacts of marijuana use on youth. Then get involved.

- Talk to your teen.

- Encourage healthy activities. Research shows that positive social outlets and hobbies can delay and prevent youth substance use.
- Dig deeper to learn how your child is feeling. People often use substances to self-medicate when struggling with stress, anxiety, loneliness or depression.
- Don't shy away from asking what is going on and, most importantly, offer support if needed.

Call for help

If you or a family member is in mental health crisis or thinking of suicide, call or text 988 to connect with help in your community. If someone is struggling with marijuana use disorder, reach out to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) or TTY: 1-800-487-4889. It is a confidential, free, 24/7 information service in English and Spanish for individuals and family members facing mental or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups and community-based organizations.

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