Marijuana use among Teens

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug used by teens today. Approximately 60 percent of the kids who use drugs use only marijuana. Of the 14.6 million marijuana users in 2002, approximately 4.8 million used it on 20 or more days in any given month (Kids and Marijuana).

The marijuana that is available to teens today is much stronger than the marijuana that was available in the 1960’s. Sometimes it is also laced with other, more potent drugs. Marijuana is physically addictive. Each year, 100,000 teens are treated for marijuana dependence. Teens who smoke marijuana heavily experience much the same symptoms of withdrawal as users of nicotine.

The University of Michigan’s Monitoring the Future study, which assesses drug and alcohol use among American youth, reported substantial increases among eighth, tenth, and twelfth graders from 1992 to 1997. These statistics show a disturbing national trend in the increase of marijuana use by teenagers (Facts about Marijuana Use).

Between 1991 and 2001, the percentage of eighth graders who used marijuana doubled from one in ten to one in five. Kids are using marijuana at an earlier age. Research indicates that the earlier teens start using marijuana, the more likely they are to become dependent on this or other drugs later in life. Of teens admitted for treatment for marijuana dependence, 56 percent had first used the drug by fourteen years of age, and 26 percent had begun by twelve years of age (Kids and Marijuana).

According to the 1998 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA), marijuana was the most frequently used drug of choice by teens. The NHSDA also reported that teens using marijuana on twelve or more days during the past year, 58 percent of them had one problem that they related to their marijuana use, 41 percent had two problems, and 28 percent had at least three problems that they related to their marijuana use. From age 12 to age 13, the proportion of teens who say they could buy marijuana if they wanted to more than triples, from 14 to 50 percent. Also the percentage of teens who say that they know a student at their school who sells drugs almost triples, from eight percent to 22 percent (Psych Central).

There are many reasons why some teens start smoking marijuana. Many kids start using because their older siblings or friends are consuming it in front of them. Often peer pressure plays a major role. Teens think it’s cool to use marijuana; they see their favorite movie stars smoking it in movies and their favorite bands sing songs about it. The problem becomes more severe when teens start relying on marijuana and think that they need it to escape from problems at school, home life, or with friends.

Some of the signs teenagers exhibit when using marijuana are: dizziness and trouble walking, red bloodshot eyes, trouble remembering things that just happened, and they often appear silly and giggly for no apparent reason. The way marijuana affects each teen depends on several factors including:
• How strong the marijuana is;
• What the user expects to happen;
• Whether the user is drinking alcohol or using other drugs;
• The user’s previous marijuana consumption;
• Where the drug is used

Some teens feel no effects from marijuana the first few times they smoke it. Others may feel relaxed and somewhat giddy. Quite often marijuana makes the teen feel very hungry and thirsty. Others can sometimes experience bad effects from marijuana. They may become highly paranoid or have feelings of anxiety or dizziness (N.I.D.A.).

Regular marijuana users often develop breathing problems, such as chronic coughing and wheezing. Marijuana contains the same cancer causing chemicals as tobacco. The amount of tar inhaled by marijuana smokers and the level of carbon monoxide absorbed by those who smoke marijuana are three to five times greater than among tobacco smokers.

The active ingredient in marijuana is THC (tetrahydrocannabinal). The behaviors exhibited by introducing THC to the brain are similar to those demonstrated by alcohol consumption. Marijuana can induce several emotional responses such as relaxation, introspection, feeling “in tune” with the world, and irrationality.

The teen drug abuser attempts to reconcile his basic urges with the demands of reality through the use of marijuana and other drugs. This behavior is directed toward the pursuit of pleasure and reduction of pain. If and when the teen seeks treatment, they are often underdeveloped emotionally, academically, and vocationally (Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, pg. 350).

The use of marijuana by teens can affect school, sports, and other activities; marijuana also affects memory, judgment, and perception. Teens who smoke marijuana on a regular basis start to lose interest in their appearance and how they are doing in school, at work, and at home.

The short-term effects of marijuana include memory problems, distorted perception, trouble problem solving, and loss of motor coordination. Marijuana has a strong odor that clings to teens’ hair and clothing and can remain on their breath despite efforts to mask it. The reactive properties of marijuana aren’t like other drugs. Not much is known for sure about the physical mechanisms of addiction and withdrawal. Some claim that marijuana is totally non-addicting, while others say that it is just as addicting as other substances.

Since the reasons for marijuana addiction among teens are unclear, it is impossible to assess whether or not they may become hooked until it has already happened. Research has now established that marijuana is addictive. Every year more teens enter treatment with the diagnosis of marijuana dependence than for all other illicit drugs combined. Sixty percent of teens admitted for drug treatment say marijuana is their primary drug of choice.

Researchers have found that heavy marijuana use impairs teenagers’ ability to retain information and concentrate. Regular marijuana use has been shown to be associated with poor academic performance. This is of a huge concern during teens’ peak learning years, as their brains are still developing. There is an association between an increase in marijuana use and a decrease in the likelihood of attaining at least a high school education. Students who smoke marijuana are more than twice as likely to cut class that those who don’t smoke.
Teens get a mixed message about marijuana, but the message needs to be clear. Marijuana is an illegal substance that affects teens in many harmful ways. It is very important to begin talking with kids about it by at least twelve years of age. Magazines or newspaper articles are often a good place to start your discussion about drugs. Teens need to be told clearly and often that using marijuana and other illegal substances carries significant health, safety, and legal risks (Kids using Marijuana).