Marijuana: Natural = Safe, Right?

Marijuana is readily available to use in many states in the USA. Understanding the possible risks of use is important to ensure the safety of our Veterans.

No matter how you use marijuana (smoke it, eat it, or apply to your skin), it may cause problems with both short term and long term use.

How marijuana affects your BRAIN:

**Potential effects from Short Term Use**
- Poor focus, memory and reaction time
- Difficulty with problem solving
- Hallucinations, paranoia, anxiety

**Potential effects from Long Term Use**
- Memory problems and trouble learning new things
- Depression, hallucinations, paranoia, anxiety, worsening PTSD symptoms
- Addiction

- It is not safe to drive while on marijuana. It makes it hard to judge distance, concentrate, react quickly to signals and sounds, be alert and coordinated. **If alcohol is combined, this risk is even higher!**
- In regular users, some of the effects from long term use may last for days or even weeks after stopping marijuana.
How inhaling marijuana affects your LUNGS:

- **Inhaling harmful chemicals**
  - Gases
  - Small particles
  - Carcinogens (toxins linked to cancer)

- **Breathing problems similar to tobacco smokers**
  - Daily cough with mucus
  - Difficulty breathing
  - Lung infections (bronchitis, pneumonia)

How marijuana affects your HEART:

- **Increases risk of heart attack**
  - Within the first hour of smoking

- **Increases heart rate**
  - 20–100% increase after smoking
  - Increase lasts up to three hours

- **Changes in heart rhythm**
  - Feels like your heart skips a beat, or is fluttering, or beating too fast or too slow
Is it SAFE to use marijuana with other medications?

A combination that can be concerning is the use of opioids and/or benzodiazepines with marijuana.

**Opioids + Benzodiazepines + Marijuana:**

**Drowsiness:** All three can cause drowsiness.

**Reaction time:** All three can reduce reaction time. Do not drive or operate machinery.

**Overdose:** Opioids and Benzodiazepines can cause reduced breathing and in some cases, breathing can stop and a person can die. Marijuana containing higher levels of THC may cause difficulty with thinking and memory and this could result in medication errors where extra doses of opioids, benzodiazepines, or other medications may be taken.

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**Example of Opioids**

- Morphine (MS Contin®, Kadian®)
- Oxycodone (Percocet®, OxyContin®)
- Hydrocodone (Vicodin®, Norco®)
- Fentanyl (Duragesic®)
- Methadone
- Heroin

**Example of Benzodiazepines**

- Lorazepam (Ativan®)
- Diazepam (Valium®)
- Alprazolam (Xanax®)
- Clonazepam (Klonopin®)

If you have specific questions about the safety of using marijuana with other medications, please contact your provider or pharmacist.

Some marijuana users can become addicted!

- 30% of daily users can develop problem use
- People that start using marijuana before the age of 18 are 4 to 7 times more likely to develop problem use
- Problem use can lead to DEPENDENCE
- Dependence can lead to ADDICTION when a person cannot stop using marijuana despite negative consequences

You can have problems with marijuana withdrawal.

- You may have withdrawal symptoms the day after you stop using. These can get worse 2 to 3 days after using and can take 1 to 2 weeks or longer to go away.

If you have specific questions about the safety of using marijuana with other medications, please contact your provider or pharmacist.
The marijuana plant is not an FDA-approved medicine:
The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not approved the marijuana plant as a medication due to lack of studies on the risks and benefits. Marijuana contains over 100 chemical substances known as cannabinoids. Some of these, like tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), have mind altering effects and can be intoxicating. Cannabidiol (CBD), another cannabinoid, does not cause the same “high” users of THC experience. THC has been studied for the treatment of several conditions, including nausea and increasing appetite. CBD is similarly being studied for a number of conditions, including childhood epilepsy and inflammation.

What is different between the marijuana product I get from the marijuana shop and a prescription from the pharmacy?

The right dose of any medicine is important. A specific dose of THC is approved to treat nausea, but high doses of THC may cause vomiting. The ingredients in a medicine must be measured and stay the same from one dose to the next. The marijuana plant contains unknown ingredients that change from plant to plant. This makes it hard to control the “dose” of marijuana needed to treat a condition and use it in the same way we use other medicines.

Future studies are ongoing to establish the role of the marijuana plant and the cannabinoids found in the plant for treatment of medical conditions. If you have questions about using a marijuana product for a medical condition, please discuss this with your medical provider to determine the most appropriate treatment for you. VA Providers are not able to prescribe marijuana products.