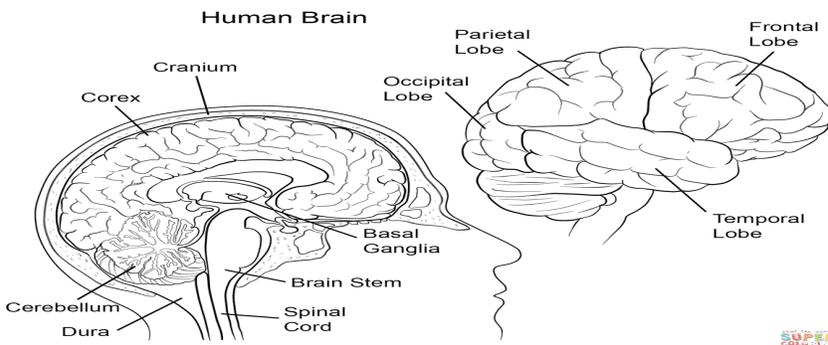


## Quick Facts about the Risks of Marijuana if It's Legalized

Now May Not be the Time to Legalize Marijuana in Virginia

Issues like social justice, the pandemic, and a financial recession haunt the Commonwealth. The decisions of legislators and community leaders today will affect Virginians for years, possibly decades. Therefore, an abundance of caution is needed when weighing the risks against any potential benefits of legalizing a DEA Schedule 1, illicit, psychoactive substance. Although some may think marijuana is a benign or natural plant, the evidence-based research and many reputable organizations have found risks associated with its legalization.

*What are the risks of regular marijuana use?* Of initial concern are the effects on the brain. Marijuana can cause psychological dependence and physical addiction. Research shows that 1-in-6 people who begin marijuana use prior to age 18 can become addicted and 1-in-10 adults who use can become addicted. Marijuana can cause permanent IQ loss of as much as 8 points which does not return if use begins at a young age. Using marijuana can affect memory, learning, concentration, attention, and problem solving. Additional risks include: reduced testosterone in boys and men, amotivational syndrome, chronic cough, bronchitis, life dissatisfaction, other drug/alcohol use disorders, and disruptions to athletic performance. Whether smoked, eaten or vaped, marijuana use during pregnancy and while nursing may be harmful to a baby's health. Problems include fetal growth restriction, risk of stillbirth, preterm birth, low birth weight, and long-term brain development issues affecting memory, learning, and behavior. [1]



*Is there a link between marijuana use and psychiatric disorders?* Yes. The amount of drug used, the age of first use, and a preexisting genetic or other vulnerability have been shown to influence this relationship. Studies have linked marijuana use to increased risk for psychiatric disorders, including psychosis, depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders, but causality is hard to determine. [2] Adolescents who had a past year major depressive episode were more likely than adolescents without one to be past year marijuana users (25% vs. 11%). Adults who had any type of mental illness or serious mental illness were more likely than those without any mental illness to be past year users of marijuana (29% or 39% vs. 13%). [3] Marijuana use has been shown to exacerbate mental illness in patients with schizophrenia and trigger an acute psychotic reaction in non-schizophrenic people, especially at high doses. Inconsistent and modest associations have been reported between marijuana use, suicidal thoughts, and attempted suicide among teens. [2; 4]



*Why does marijuana's THC level and potency matter?* Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the main psychoactive ingredient/chemical in marijuana among the hundreds of chemicals found in the plant. Decades ago, marijuana's THC levels were 5% to 25% but now levels are between 20% to 95%. The higher the percentage of THC, the greater the potency of psychoactive effects plus risk of long and short-term health effects. Potency can also lead to impairment in problem solving, motor skills, peripheral vision, navigating social situations, academic performance, and work place readiness and safety. Washington state cites the average THC levels of marijuana to be 20% in flower products and 79% in extracts for inhaling in 2016. [5] Researchers at the National Center for Biotechnology Information didn't find research that validated benefits for any medical condition with current, increased levels of THC. They reported the purpose of these potent products is to produce a high despite their potential danger and likelihood of causing addiction. [6] Colorado had to enact special regulations in 2019 due to accidental exposure and overdose in children under age 9 from potent edibles. All cannabis packaging now includes a universal THC symbol on the label with warnings such as: "Contains marijuana. Keep away from children." [6]

*Are professional, reputable organizations saying marijuana is addictive and harmful?* Yes. They include the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Society of Addiction Medicine, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the National Institutes of Health.

[1] [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov); [2] Hasin, D. S., Kerridge, B. T., Saha, T. D., Huang, B., Pickering, R., Smith, S. M., ... & Grant, B. F. (2016). Prevalence and correlates of DSM-5 cannabis use disorder, 2012-2013: findings from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions-III. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 173(6), 588-599; [3] National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2018 [4] [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov); [5] Smart, R., Caulkins, J. P., Kilmer, B., Davenport, S., & Midgette, G. (2017). Variation in cannabis potency and prices in a newly legal market: evidence from 30 million cannabis sales in Washington state. *Addiction*, 112(12), 2167-2177; [6] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6312155/>

This flyer is the second in a series of six from the Community Coalitions of Virginia (CCoVA; <https://communitycoalitionsofva.com/>). The previous flyer covered financial ramifications. Please direct questions and comments to Dr. Mary Crozier, Immediate Past Chair of CCoVA and member of CCoVA's Legislation Committee; [mkcrozier@gmail.com](mailto:mkcrozier@gmail.com)

