

Marijuana and Addiction



The classic definition of addiction includes tolerance, withdrawal, loss of control, unsuccessful or failed attempts to abstain or control use, craving, pre-occupation with use, and use despite adverse consequences (use despite psychological, social, legal or personal consequences.) From any and/or all of these perspectives, marijuana is a drug of addiction. The American Psychiatric Association identifies Cannabis Dependency as a substance related disorder (304.30), and the criteria defining it. While tolerance to marijuana and psychological dependency are commonly accepted as serious syndromes of marijuana use, some heavy users of marijuana show signs of physical withdrawal.

A cannabis dependence syndrome has been identified, affecting about 7-10% of those who use marijuana (Kalant, 2004; Hall & Solowij, 1998). According to NIDA, it is estimated that 9 percent of users will become dependent upon it; the number goes up to 1-in-6 for those who start using it in their teens; and to 25-to-50 percent for daily users. Moreover, there is a marijuana withdrawal syndrome, which, while “mild and subtle compared with the physical syndromes of alcohol or heroin,” (Joy, Watson, & Benson) has symptoms including “restlessness, irritability, mild agitation, insomnia, sleep EEG disturbance, nausea, and cramping.”

Marijuana is addictive; there are more teens in treatment with a diagnosis of marijuana dependence than all other illicit drugs combined (Treatment Episodes Data Set (TEDS) 1992-2002, Department of Health and Human Services, 2006.) According to TEDS in 2008 there were 346,554 admissions into drug treatment programs who reported that marijuana was their primary drug of addiction (a 270% increase since 1992.)

Other research states that withdrawal symptoms from marijuana include irritability, anxiety, insomnia and craving for the drug. These symptoms can last one or two weeks after cessation. Long term users are at increased risk of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia (National Institute on Drug Abuse: NIDA Info Facts, adapted from Caspi et al., Biological Psychiatry, May 2005.) NIDA also demonstrated two additional features of cannabis dependency: it was hard for dependent individuals to quit, and they developed an “increased aggression” peaking about one week after discontinuing the drug.

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