

Children's Exposure To Marijuana – A Guide For Parents

Children's exposure to marijuana is an important health issue now that medical marijuana and recreational marijuana are legal in some states in the United States. In the past few years more children have been accidentally exposed to marijuana smoke and marijuana in food. This fact sheet provides an overview of our current knowledge about the health effects to children of marijuana and what can be done to prevent these effects.

How can my child be exposed to marijuana?

Children can be exposed to marijuana either by breathing in secondhand smoke or eating foods containing marijuana. Most secondhand smoke comes off the end of the cigarette or joint; the rest comes from the smoke the smoker breathes out. Infants and children breathe in the secondhand smoke when it's in the air around them. There are reports of children with marijuana smoke exposure severe enough to require admission to hospital intensive care units.

Most children who require hospital treatment for marijuana have been exposed by eating it. Many new marijuana products on the market are tempting to children because they look like bakery products and candies. These products often contain more tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) than marijuana smoke. That makes them more dangerous to children than secondhand smoke.

Is marijuana smoke dangerous to my child?

Smoke from marijuana is a mixture of many chemicals which may be dangerous. Marijuana smoke contains many of the same cancer-causing chemicals as tobacco smoke, and certain chemicals like cyanide and ammonia are significantly higher in marijuana smoke compared to cigarette smoke. Parents should keep their children away from marijuana smoke.

What are the health effects of marijuana exposure in children?

When children eat food containing marijuana they can have extreme sleepiness or low energy. If they inhale the smoke they can have lung irritation and asthma attacks. Higher potency products can cause anxiety, bizarre behavior, and agitation. Children can also experience the same effects as adults such as blood-shot eyes, increased appetite, dry mouth, and decreased coordination. Significant exposures can lead to severe hyperactive behaviors, slowed breathing, and even coma. Health effects of marijuana can last 24-36 hours in children.

If you think your child has eaten or inhaled marijuana contact your local poison center. The national poison center hotline number is: **1-800-222-1222**

What are possible long-term health effects of marijuana smoke exposure?

Many of the long-term health effects of exposure to marijuana smoke are still being studied, but it may cause long-term cough and lung infections. There may also be an increased risk of heart attack, stroke, decreased fertility, psychiatric symptoms and disorders, and problems with memory, attention, and

learning. As of now, there is no clear evidence that secondhand exposure to marijuana smoke can cause cancer, although marijuana smoke contains cancer-causing chemicals.

Can my child get a “contact high”?

When marijuana plant material is burned, it triggers a chemical reaction that produces THC. While a large portion of the THC is delivered directly to the smoker’s lungs, a smaller but still significant amount is released into the air. A study conducted in 1983 showed that inhalation of secondhand marijuana smoke can result in THC in the blood and urine, proving that the smoke products have been absorbed into the body. The level of exposure is higher if marijuana is smoked in small, enclosed areas or areas with poor ventilation.

Is smoking marijuana dangerous during pregnancy?

It can be. A study published in 1994 showed that children whose mothers smoked marijuana during pregnancy had a decrease in attention span, brain function, and memory. Other studies have shown that children born to mothers who smoked marijuana during pregnancy can have higher levels of anxiety and depression, decreased IQ scores, lower academic ability, decreased growth, and low birth weight.

Is medical marijuana the same as street marijuana?

Medical marijuana is sold in pills, food products, and in dried form for smoking. Most marijuana used for medical purposes is produced in the same way as regular marijuana, so the health effects are the same. However, medical marijuana is generally safer since it is grown according to standards and there is less risk of it being laced with dangerous fillers. Some medical marijuana causes less “high” since the parts of the marijuana plant used for health purposes are different than the parts used for a “high”.

How can I protect my child from the health hazards of marijuana?

- If you think your child has eaten or inhaled marijuana contact your local poison center. The national poison center hotline number is: **1-800-222-1222**
- Keep your home free of marijuana smoke.
- Do not smoke marijuana in the car or other small, enclosed places.
- Keep marijuana-containing foods or drinks out of reach of children and/or in a separate locked container.
- Do not store marijuana-containing foods with your regular food products.
- Have conversations with your children about the differences between marijuana-containing foods and regular food products, similar to warning children about alcohol.

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