Marijuana

After alcohol, marijuana is the most commonly abused drug among college students, with 30-35% of college students reporting use in the last year, although marijuana use among college students has decreased slightly in recent years. Students often underestimate the risks associated with marijuana use. These can range from physical effects, similar to cigarette smoking; cognitive impairment, and legal consequences.

Marijuana and your body

Once marijuana is smoked or ingested, the active ingredient THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) travels to the bloodstream, brain, and other organs in the body. THC heads straight for cannabinoid receptors in the brain, which are located in the brain’s “pleasure” center, memory, and movement control centers. Although the high may only last a few hours, THC can remain in the body for weeks after use.

Some short-term effects:

- Feelings of intoxication
- Rapid heartbeat
- Dry mouth and throat
- Bloodshot eyes
- Loss of coordination or poor sense of balance
- Decreased reaction time
- Impaired or reduced short-term memory
- Impaired judgment and perception
- Altered sense of time
- Intense anxiety or panic attacks

Chronic use and dependence

Chronic marijuana users tend to experience the same respiratory problems as regular cigarette smokers (coughing, wheezing, upper respiratory illnesses, and increased risk of lung infections like pneumonia). Chronic use may also increase their risk of injury, particularly if they are driving while high.
Other long term effects include:

- Decreased concentration
- Decreased immune system performance
- Decreased sperm production in men
- Learning and memory problems, affecting ability to perform multi-step tasks
- Difficulty with problem-solving and long term memory

After a period of chronic use, a person may become marijuana dependent. Dependence involves developing a tolerance (needing to use more to produce the same effect), using even in the presence of negative consequences, and giving up social or recreation activities in favor of getting high. Chronic use can lead to increased apathy and withdrawal from friends, school, and fun activities like playing sports or participating in clubs. In other words, if students no longer enjoys things they used to because of marijuana this may signal a problem. Those who become dependent may often experience withdrawal symptoms after discontinuing use. These symptoms may include irritability, sleeping difficulties, anxiety, craving, and depression.

**Marijuana and the law**

It is illegal to grow, buy, sell, or possess marijuana in the state of North Carolina. That means choosing to use marijuana equals breaking the law, which can lead to heavy fines, academic suspension, loss of financial aid, and even jail time.

UNC has a zero tolerance when it comes to marijuana. Read [UNC’s Policy on Illegal Drugs](https://campushealth.unc.edu/health-topics/alcohol-and-other-drugs/marijuana) for more information.

Marijuana use can also compromise your financial aid status. The Higher Education Act prevents access to federal student loans for anyone with a drug conviction, no matter how minor. In the 2003-04 academic year, an estimated 41,000 applicants for federal student aid were disqualified because of drug convictions. A marijuana conviction can stay on your record for years, and with more and more companies performing background checks on potential employees, this could mean trouble landing your dream job post graduation.

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