

The Health Pros and Cons of Smoking Pot

Some research suggests it can help with depression, arthritis, and other conditions, but does that mean you should be lighting up?

By Barbara Brody



Weed. Pot. Grass. Mary Jane. Whatever you called it back in the 60's or 70s, marijuana probably hasn't played a major role in your life since. Sure, you might have spent some time warning your kids and grandkids about the perils of cannabis, and you might have [changed your stance on legalization](#) several times. But you most likely haven't rolled a joint in ages.

Although the number of baby boomers who use marijuana appears to be on the rise, it's still a relatively small group. (In 2011, [6.3 percent of people age 50-59 used marijuana](#), up from 2.7 percent in 2002.) That might be changing, thanks to the trend toward legalization: Medical marijuana is currently [legal in 23 states](#) plus Washington, D.C., and it's been sanctioned for non-medical purposes in four states as well as D.C.

Does this shift mean it's time to reacquaint yourself with reefer? Whether you're motivated by a serious health issue or just feeling nostalgic, here's some expert advice worth considering.

This is not the pot of your youth

"Marijuana is much stronger today than it was in the 60s and 70s," says Laura M. Borgelt, PharmD, professor of clinical pharmacy and family medicine at University of Colorado Skaggs School of Pharmacy. The amount of THC (tetrahydrocannabinol, which is the psychoactive component) of marijuana used to average less than 10 percent; some current strains contain nearly 30 percent THC. And even if you're buying the drug from a legit dispensary, you might not know what you're getting. Only certain states test marijuana products for potency and contaminants, say Borgelt. The takeaway: Start with the lowest possible "dose" (i.e. one inhalation) and see what happens.

Pot and your health

First, the good news: Research has shown that marijuana itself--or specific compounds in the drug, such as THC and CBD (cannabidiol)--might help with a host of health problems. Its impact on chemotherapy-induced pain and nausea is well known, but there's a growing amount of research in other areas as well. One study found that rheumatoid arthritis patients who used a cannabis-based medication for five weeks had significantly less pain after five weeks. In another, researchers found that substances found in marijuana seem to combat depression symptoms. Scientists have also reason to believe that THC might prevent or slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease.

And a recent study, which Borgelt co-authored, found that marijuana reduces migraines

But Borgelt doesn't recommend swapping your migraine meds for pot anytime soon. The reason: Most marijuana research is still in the preliminary stages--the depression study mentioned above was done in rats; the Alzheimer's one on cell cultures--and a lot more studies need to be conducted before scientists can definitively recommend this drug as an effective treatment for any medical condition.

You should try other treatments first

So far, the best studies showing that pot can truly help with health issues have been done on people who have cancer-related pain or nausea, as well as those with neuropathy (nerve pain, especially the kind that's associated with HIV). If you're suffering from one of those conditions, it's reasonable to consider marijuana or a related product such as [Marinol](#), says Borgelt. However, she cautions that there are other first-line treatments you ought to try before you move on to weed. Whatever your ailment, there are many FDA-approved medications that have been much more rigorously tested for safety and efficacy; if those fail you, marijuana might be worth a look.

Pot is more dangerous for people over age 50

"Kidney function decreases over time, so the way our bodies process medication can differ and change over time," says Borgelt.

"This may cause more significant or prolonged side effects, such as extreme sedation, loss of coordination, paranoia, and anxiety or agitation." Also worth noting: Most people in this age demo are already taking one (or several) prescription medications, and adding marijuana to the mix could lead to a dangerous drug interaction. Using pot with the blood thinner warfarin (Coumadin), for example, increases the chance of excessive bleeding. It's also risky to combine marijuana with benzodiazepines (like Valium and Xanax) and certain epilepsy medications. Still thinking pot might be right for the grown-up you? Be sure to run your complete list of meds and supplements by your doctor first.



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