



CANNACADE

Promoting Responsible Cannabis Use Through Education

Recreational Cannabis and Mental Health

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Chronic recreational cannabis use is associated with increased risk of psychotic disorders

Cannabis use can worsen manic symptoms in individuals with bipolar disorder

Cannabis use is linked to a higher risk of suicidal ideation and attempts

Frequent and early onset cannabis use appears to be the main risk factor

Introduction

Cannabis is one of the most commonly used recreational drugs globally. With the legalization and decriminalization of cannabis in South Africa and other parts of the world, there has been increased availability and acceptance of its recreational use. At the same time, medical cannabis is increasingly being used for symptom management in some health conditions. However, research shows clear links between chronic recreational cannabis use and adverse mental health outcomes, particularly in vulnerable populations.



While medical cannabis may have a suitable role under medical guidance for some patients, chronic recreational cannabis use has been associated with increased risks of developing psychotic disorders, worsening of manic and depressive symptoms, and suicidal ideation. The main risk appears to be from frequent, long-term recreational cannabis smoking, particularly starting at a young age during adolescence. **This digest summarizes current evidence on the impact of chronic recreational cannabis use on mental health for health professionals and drug counsellors.** It focuses on the risks of chronic use rather than occasional or medical use.

Cannabis and Mental Health

Bipolar Disorder

Several studies show an association between cannabis use and worsening of manic symptoms in individuals with bipolar disorder. Frequent cannabis use is linked to longer and more severe manic episodes.

Evidence also suggests cannabis use may increase the risk of developing manic symptoms in those without a diagnosis of bipolar disorder. A meta-analysis found a 3-fold increased risk of new onset manic symptoms in cannabis users.

Psychosis

Strong evidence from longitudinal studies indicates that cannabis use increases the risk of developing psychotic disorders like schizophrenia, especially with early and frequent use.

The risk is dose-dependent, and cannabis use has been linked to an earlier onset of psychosis. Underlying mechanisms likely involve dopamine dysregulation.

Suicidal Ideation

Systematic reviews show an association between cannabis use and increased suicidal ideation and attempts. The odds of suicidal ideation are nearly 3 times higher among users.

Several studies found cannabis use predicts later suicidal ideation independent of depression and other substance use. Impulsivity and early trauma may mediate increased suicide risk.

Anxiety

Evidence links chronic cannabis use to increased anxiety symptoms and a higher risk of developing an anxiety disorder. However, associations are complex and bidirectional.

CBD may have anxiolytic effects and alleviate anxiety, while THC appears more likely to induce anxiety, especially at high doses.

Habits that Increase Risk

- Frequent and early-onset (adolescence) cannabis use
- High potency THC products
- Co-occurring alcohol and tobacco use
- Preexisting mental health conditions

At-Risk Groups

1. Adolescents and young adults
2. Persons with a family history of psychosis or bipolar disorder
3. Persons with early trauma or victimization experiences
4. Persons with impulsive personality traits

Any good news?

Some studies indicate certain cannabinoids, such as CBD, may have anxiolytic (anti-anxiety) effects and could help alleviate anxiety symptoms. However, the evidence is not conclusive at this time.

There is anecdotal evidence that some patients with bipolar disorder may use cannabis to self-medicate and alleviate mood symptoms. However, research shows cannabis generally worsens mania symptoms.

Cannabis may help improve sleep in some patients, which could indirectly benefit certain mental health conditions. But research finds mixed effects on sleep quality.

In patients with PTSD, a few studies found some short-term reduction in symptoms with cannabis. However, the benefits appear modest and inconsistent. Long-term use may actually worsen PTSD symptoms and cognition.

Evidence that cannabis could improve symptoms of depression is very limited. While some report temporary effects on mood, chronic use appears to exacerbate the risk of depression over time.

For most mental health conditions such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and suicidal ideation, the research overwhelmingly points to significant adverse effects of cannabis use rather than any benefits.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Substantial evidence demonstrates that cannabis use, especially frequent and early onset use, can precipitate the onset of major mental illnesses, including psychosis, and worsen symptoms in those with bipolar disorder. It is also linked to increased suicidal ideation and attempts. Health professionals should screen for cannabis use in patients with mental health conditions and educate young people on these risks. Policies should aim to prevent early exposure to cannabis during critical developmental periods. More research is needed on factors that mediate the cannabis-mental illness link.

Sources

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