

White House Drug Czar, Research and Mental Health Communities

Warn Parents That Marijuana Use Can Lead to Depression, Suicidal Thoughts and Schizophrenia

Serious Psychiatric Impact of Marijuana Use Evident in Growing Body of Research

(Washington, D.C.) – The Nation’s Drug Czar, John P. Walters, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Administrator, Charles G. Curie, joined with scientists and experts from the leading mental health organizations today to alert parents about the danger marijuana poses to their teens’ mental health.

“A growing body of evidence now demonstrates that smoking marijuana can increase the risk of serious mental health problems,” said Walters, Director of National Drug Control Policy. “New research being conducted here and abroad illustrates that marijuana use, particularly during the teen years, can lead to depression, thoughts of suicide, and schizophrenia. This is yet another reason that parents must stay closely involved with their teens and ensure that they are not smoking marijuana.”

A number of prominent studies have recently identified a direct link between marijuana use and increased risk of mental health problems. Recent research makes a stronger case that cannabis smoking itself is a causal agent in psychiatric symptoms, particularly schizophrenia. During the past three years, these studies have strengthened that association and further found that the age when marijuana is first smoked is a crucial risk factor in later development of mental health problems.

A report released today from SAMSHA found that adults who first used marijuana before age 12 were twice as likely as adults who first used marijuana at age 18 or older to be classified as having serious mental illness in the past year than were adults who first used marijuana at age 18 or older.

“Kids today are using marijuana at younger ages, putting them at greater risk,” said Charles G. Curie, SAMHSA Administrator. “We have found that the younger a person starts smoking marijuana, the greater the likelihood they have of developing an addiction and serious mental illness later in life.”

“Mental health disorders such as depression and schizophrenia contribute to the mortality of our citizens, and suicide is one of the leading preventable causes of death,” said U.S. Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona, M.D., M.P.H., F.A.C.S. “As a society we must do everything we can to promote mental health and prevent mental illness – and that includes keeping our kids drug-free. Parents and teens alike must realize the long-term effects marijuana can have on the brain.”

Several recent studies have linked youth marijuana use with depression, suicidal thoughts and schizophrenia:

- Young people who use marijuana weekly have double the risk of developing depression.
- Teens aged 12 to 17 who smoke marijuana weekly are three times more likely than non-users to have suicidal thoughts.
- Marijuana use in some teens has been linked to increased risk for schizophrenia in later years.
- A British study found that as many as one in four people may have a genetic profile that makes marijuana five times more likely to trigger psychotic disorders.

Evidence has recently emerged that some people's genetic make-up may predispose them to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of marijuana on mental health. For instance, a major study out of the Netherlands concluded that use of the drug "moderately increases" the risk of psychotic symptoms in young people but has "a much stronger effect" in those with evidence of predisposition.

"The nonchalance about marijuana in Europe and the U.S. is worrisome," said Neil McKeganey, Ph.D., Professor of Drug Misuse Research and Director, Centre for Drug Misuse Research, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland. "Marijuana is the first illegal drug that many young people use and teens don't view it as a serious drug, and when children are exposed only to advice from kids like themselves, the risks seem meaningless. We're starting to see marijuana in a new light given recent research into the connection between marijuana and mental illness."

This new evidence comes with a warning to parents, as they are the most important influence in their teens' lives when it comes to drugs. "Tell your teens the facts and tell them not to use marijuana," said Robert L. DuPont, M.D., President of the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc., and a leading advocate for the power of parents in preventing drug use. "Take meaningful actions to see that they do not. A vital part of your job as a parent is helping your teen grow up drug-free."

As part of the Office of National Drug Control Policy's (ONDCP) National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign, this outreach effort features a compendium of recent research linking marijuana and mental illness and an Open Letter to parents on "Marijuana and Your Teen's Mental Health." The letter highlights some of the new research about the serious consequences of teen marijuana use on mental health and is signed by ONDCP and 12 of the Nation's leading mental health, behavioral health and addiction treatment organizations: American Psychiatric Association; American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; American Society of Addiction Medicine; Asian Community Mental Health Services; Association for Medical Education and Research in Substance Abuse; Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc.; National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association; National Association of Addiction Treatment Providers; National Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare; National Latino Behavioral Health Association; National Medical Association; and the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. The letter begins appearing next week in *USA Today* and newspapers in the 25

largest cities nationwide, including *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, and will also run in *The Nation*, *The National Journal*, *The National Review*, *The New Republic*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *The Weekly Standard*.

On the Media Campaign's Web site for parents, TheAntiDrug.com, adults can learn more about how marijuana affects the developing teen brain, including the links between marijuana and depression, suicidal thoughts and schizophrenia. Visitors can take a virtual tour of a human brain to learn how marijuana impairs, and even changes, the functionality of the centers responsible for maintaining overall mental health. Parents can also view responses from a qualified psychiatrist on the most common questions regarding marijuana and mental health.