

Why Marijuana Use by Celebrities is a Big Deal

Michael Phelps made history winning 8 gold medals and breaking international records at the 2008 Olympic Games. Now he is making a different kind of history with his admitted marijuana use at a college party in South Carolina, a DUI in 2004 and anecdotal stories of heavy alcohol use. His actions send a powerful message. To kids, this behavior shows that you can have it all: achieve extraordinary success, break the law and earn huge sums. To the general public, his behavior is one more example of marijuana use as being normative. Even though the majority of the public does not use marijuana, celebrity use without corresponding sanctions mainstreams the issue and is a big deal. To its credit, USA swimming has suspended him from competition for 3 months. South Carolina authorities are considering prosecution. Kellogg has cancelled its contract with Phelps. Why are his other sponsors not following suit? There are good reasons why marijuana is illegal in the United States and throughout most of the world.

Pushes to Legalize Marijuana Sends the Wrong Message to Youth

- Of the 10 states that have approved “medical” marijuana, 8 have the highest percentages of young people ages 12-25 who have used marijuana in the past month.ⁱ They are the majority of states in the top ten for first time use of marijuana and marijuana use in the past year.
- Early initiation of marijuana use reduces educational attainment of youth.ⁱⁱ
- Youth who use marijuana are more likely to have higher rates of other illegal drug use.ⁱⁱⁱ This is most evident for heavy users. It is even more pronounced for adolescents than for adults.
- Students who smoke marijuana regularly are more likely to drop out of high school.^{iv} Students who have smoked marijuana within the past year are more than twice as likely to have cut class as students who did not, while health problems associated with using marijuana can keep students from attending school due to illness.^v
- Heavy marijuana use may damage developing brain in teens, and young adults.^{vi} Research has also shown that the human brain goes through the most growth during the adolescent years. Marijuana can affect proper development of the brain, which could not only cause learning problems in high school, but also in the future.^{vii}
- Marijuana use is a major cause of highway crashes, injury and death.^{viii} In a study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration about 17% (1 in 5) of crash victims under the age of 18 tested positive for marijuana.^{ix} A study in Maryland found that half of the seriously injured drivers 20 and younger tested positive for recent marijuana use.^x

Marijuana Use Impacts Mental Health

- Prevalence of depression and anxiety increases with higher rates of cannabis use.^{xi} This pattern has been shown clearest in young women who use cannabis daily. They had more than a fivefold increase in the odds of depression and anxiety compared to non-users.

- Teens who smoke marijuana at least once a month are three times more likely to have suicidal thoughts than are non-users.^{xii}
- Using marijuana may increase the chance of psychosis.^{xiii} Even infrequent marijuana use could raise the small but real risk of this mental illness by 40%. In an analysis of 35 studies of marijuana users, the risk for psychosis for heavy marijuana users (daily or weekly) was 50% to 200% higher than for nonusers.

Marijuana is Addictive

- As many young people are being treated for marijuana problems as are treated for alcohol and all other drug problems combined.^{xiv} Youth younger than 20 years old account for nearly half of the total number of treatment admissions for marijuana dependence.^{xv}
- Frequent marijuana use results in high risk of dependence. Rates of cannabis dependence are estimated at 20% to 30% among those who have used at least five times, and even higher estimates (35%-40%) are reported among those who report near daily use.^{xvi}
- The marijuana sold today is far more powerful than the marijuana used 30 years ago. From 1992 to 2006, there was a 175% jump in the potency of marijuana that was seized.^{xvii}
- Heavy use of marijuana creates physical dependence (including tolerance and withdrawal).^{xviii}
- Signs of marijuana withdrawal include anxiety, depressed mood, decreased appetite, irritability, restlessness, difficulty sleeping, stomach pain, aggression and anger. Withdrawal symptoms due to marijuana use run similar courses to withdrawal symptoms due to other drugs in terms of magnitude and duration.^{xix}

Smoked Marijuana is NOT “Medicine”

- Smoking marijuana also causes changes in the brain that are similar to those caused by long-term use of cocaine and heroin.^{xx}
- Smoking is not a safe or consistent way to deliver a drug. There is no way to control dose. No medicine used anywhere in the world is prescribed by smoking because smoke is bad for lungs.
- Marijuana is more harmful to lungs than tobacco.^{xxi} Smoking one joint is as harmful to lungs as having up to 5 cigarettes in succession.^{xxii} Marijuana smoke has ammonia levels that are 20 times higher than tobacco smoke. Marijuana contains hydrogen cyanide, nitric oxide and aromatic amines at 3-5 times higher than tobacco smoke.
- Marijuana smokers can face faster deterioration of lungs – 20 years ahead of tobacco smokers.^{xxiii}
- The FDA does not approve of smoked marijuana as medicine.^{xxiv} Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is approved by the FDA only in a synthetic, tested form called dronabinol (“Marinol”) which is used to treat nausea in cancer and AIDS patients. It is not smoked crude marijuana. This medicine, approved by the FDA 20 years ago, can be prescribed by any licensed physician.
- Some marijuana is laced with cocaine, PCP and even chemicals like formaldehyde.^{xxv}

More information can be found at www.ibhinc.org.

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