

## *Talk It Up! Column*

### *The New Marijuana*

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Although alcohol is still the drug most widely abused by adolescents, with over half of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reporting alcohol use in the past year, there has also been a recent uptick in the percent of teens using marijuana. According to the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future report, the number of youth who used marijuana in the past year increased to 1 in 4, up 1.3% since 2016. This is the first time in seven years that there has been a statistically significant increase in adolescent marijuana use. With the increasing number of states legalizing the use of recreational marijuana, the perception that it's not harmful is spreading. This is reflected in youth perceptions: the percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> graders who disapproved of regular marijuana use dropped and more youth are now using marijuana on a daily basis than cigarettes. In light of these changes, it is important to know about how marijuana itself has been changing.

One of the main issues is the rising potency of marijuana; average THC content in the traditional dry leaf form, which some adults may be familiar with, is up from 3.8% in the 1990s to 12.2% as of 2014. That's nearly 4 times higher today than it was 20 years ago. And levels as high as 80% or 90% have been recorded in some of the more concentrated forms, such as those found in vaping products, which we'll talk more about below. The higher the THC content, the greater the likelihood of developing marijuana use disorder or addiction. This is particularly important when you consider it in relation to the increase in youth use, as the adolescent brain is still developing and is therefore more susceptible to the drug. Youth who start marijuana use before age 18 are 4-7 times more likely to develop a dependency. And those higher THC levels have led to much harsher health consequences than have previously resulted from marijuana use, including increasing instances of precipitating psychotic breaks and acting as a catalyst for long term mental health disorders, such as schizophrenia.

In a similar vein, marijuana has been found laced with a number of unsettling additions, from mold and glass shards to cocaine and unregulated manufactured opiates (like "car fentanyl"). Whether these additions are added on purpose or due to manufacturing oversight, the harmful results, sometimes as serious as death, are the same. Importantly, there is not necessarily a way to tell if any of these items are actually in any given amount of marijuana or not.

Along with these changes to the drug itself, new methods of marijuana use are also emerging. Although we may all be familiar with some methods, such as rolling and smoking or cooking into "edibles," we also need to be aware of how many people, and especially youth, are hiding marijuana use in e-cigarettes. There has been a lot of discussion lately about some of the new forms of "vaping," such as the Juul (an e-cigarette that looks just like a USB drive and can, in fact, be charged in the USB port on a computer) and the Suorin (an e-cigarette that looks like a round pod or small mouse that fits easily into the palm of your hand). Both items are manufactured specifically for vaping and supposedly the only way they can be refilled is by purchasing pre-manufactured refill pods. However, methods on how to create your own refills are spreading and, more and more often, they are used for vaping THC oil. This is especially dangerous for our youth as these items are small, easy to hide and can be used in school easily because they do not need flame to start nor do they leave the telltale scents of cigarette or

marijuana after use. In addition, as we mentioned earlier, they provide a much higher intake of either nicotine or THC than “normal” smoking and are proving just as dangerous, if not more so, in terms of addiction and other side effects (i.e. lung damage).

There is a lot of information being shared and research being done as the legalization of marijuana and its medicinal uses are becoming more widespread in our country. There is still a lot we do not know and a lot that we need to be looking into. But it is also necessary that we remember what we do know: that marijuana can have very dangerous side effects, particularly for adolescents. And even as we debate its place in our society, there is a reason that nowhere has it been legalized for anyone under 18 years old.