

Cannabis Education Toolkit



FOR PARENTS AND
ADULT MENTORS

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Cannabis safety information and tips

LEARN ABOUT TEEN USE AND HOW TO DISCUSS IT WITH TEENS

Reducing teen health risks means having access to trustworthy cannabis information. From parents to adult mentors—like teachers, youth workers, coaches, counselors, and faith leaders—this toolkit provides evidence-based facts and advice on how to have positive conversations with teens about the risks and consequences of use on teens' health.

Questions? Please contact:

The Maine Office of Cannabis Policy at (207) 287-3282
or visit maine.gov/dafs/ocp.



Overview

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT YOUTH CANNABIS USE?

WEED CAN AFFECT TEEN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

You might have laughed at your own parent's warning that "smoking weed kills brain cells," but research is starting to show just how vulnerable the brain is before we're in our mid-20s. Because teen brains are still growing, cannabis can negatively impact the parts of the brain responsible for memory formation, attention, coordination, and emotional regulation.

How can using cannabis affect teens?



- **It can impact school performance** by making it harder to learn, remember, and pay attention.¹



- **It can increase the risk of lung health problems** like chronic coughing, bronchitis, and asthma.²



- **It can affect the development of natural reflexes** and throw off coordination, balance, and reaction time.^{1,3}
- **Using as a teen can increase the risk of experiencing mental health challenges as an adult**, especially for those already at risk due to genetics.¹

Get a deeper understanding of how cannabis affects the brain on page 6.

Your Role in Preventing Teen Cannabis Use

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

**IT MIGHT BE HARD TO BELIEVE AT TIMES,
BUT YOU ARE THE NUMBER ONE INFLUENCE
ON YOUR TEEN'S BEHAVIOR**

Research shows that teens are less likely to try cannabis and illegal drugs when adults talk with them about the risks and harms of teen use.^{3,4} Parents, aunts and uncles, grandparents, teachers, coaches, counselors, and faith leaders can all make a difference in a teen's choices. Even if they act like they're not paying attention, what you say and do matters and can have an impact. Being there for the youth in your life—and giving them real, science-based facts about cannabis—helps them make informed choices about using weed.

WHERE YOU CAN START

Prepare by learning the facts

Before getting into a conversation, it's important to get educated about teen weed use. Over the last 25 years, cannabis has more than tripled in potency,⁵ and the way it affects teens has changed too. Keep reading our toolkit to get up to speed on science-based facts that can help you and your teen understand the risks.

Talk with them before social media does

Most teens get their news from social media these days,⁶ but that can mean a whole lot of misinformation about cannabis. Hearing the facts from you before they're exposed to mixed messages from friends or influencers can help them understand the real risks of weed.

Keep the conversation going

As the youth in your life gets older, it's important to maintain an open dialogue with them about how THC affects their developing bodies, brains, and mental health. Continuing to talk with teens often can result in less cannabis use⁷ when they start making independent decisions.

Model safe and healthy behaviors

Even when it seems like they're ignoring you, teens get their cues from you. Be sure to use responsibly and practice safe storage by keeping cannabis products, alcohol, and other substances in a lockable, odor-proof container that's hidden out of reach and out of sight. Consider using a safe or lockbox with a combination lock and storing it in a high cabinet or locked drawer. You can buy stash bags at local and online cannabis retailers statewide.

Cannabis 101

WHAT SHOULD YOU KNOW
ABOUT TODAY'S CANNABIS?

TIMES HAVE CHANGED, AND SO HAS CANNABIS

Cannabis - a mind-altering (psychoactive) substance that comes from a plant. Also known as weed, marijuana, pot, or kush.

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) - the main psychoactive compound in cannabis that creates a high sensation. It has been shown to affect teen brains.

Modern weed is

200%

stronger than it
was in the past^{8,9}

Today's cannabis plants contain much higher amounts of THC than even a few decades ago. Because of this, the effects are stronger and longer-lasting and can have a big impact on the teen brain during the sensitive time while it's growing.

TODAY'S CANNABIS COMES IN MANY DIFFERENT FORMS

ABSORBED CANNABIS



PILLS

Cannabis that is swallowed in the form of a capsule or tablet



EDIBLES

Cannabis that is infused in drinks or combined with food (gummies, chocolate, baked goods) and consumed



TINCTURES

Cannabis liquids that are mixed with drinks or placed under the tongue with a dropper or syringe



LOZENGES/FILMS

Cannabis concentrates that are made to dissolve in the mouth

INHALED CANNABIS



PRE-ROLLS

Rolling papers or smoking papers filled with dried cannabis—also known as *flower*—that are pre-rolled into cigarette-like shapes



CONCENTRATES

Cannabis concentrates—also called *dabs*, *shatter*, or *wax*—that are placed in a smoking device



PIPES & BONGS

Devices used for smoking dried flower or cannabis concentrates



VAPES

Vaporizing devices that contain concentrated cannabis oil, which is smoked or vaped

THC & Youth Health Risks

HOW CAN CANNABIS HARM TEEN HEALTH?

THE BRAIN IS STILL GROWING AND FINE-TUNING CONNECTIONS UNTIL OUR MID-20S

When a teen uses weed, it can interfere with the way the brain develops. The active chemical in cannabis, THC, enters the system that regulates body and brain functions. It overwhelms the brain and prevents it from doing its job, making it harder for teens to form memories, stay focused, manage stress, and more.

SOMETIMES THE SIGNS STAY HIDDEN, BUT YOU MAY NOTICE A TEEN ...

LACKING MOTIVATION

Being checked out might not be teen angst. THC can cause teens to act less like themselves because it reduces the chemicals in the brain's **basal ganglia** that affect pleasure, satisfaction, and motivation.^{10,11,12,13}

FORGETTING WHAT MATTERS MOST

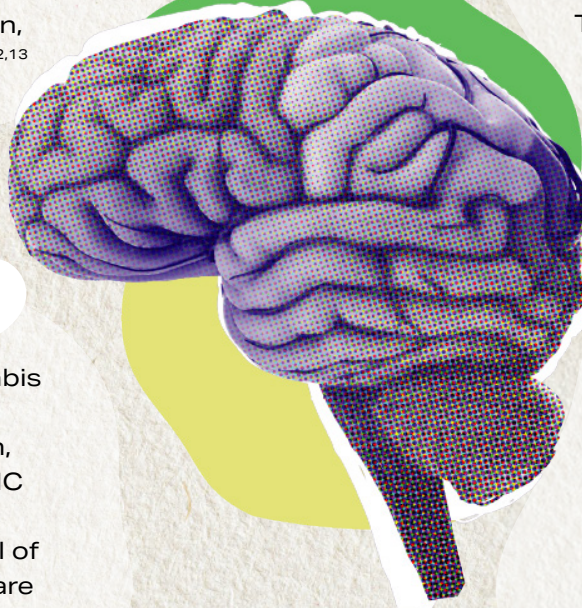
Struggling to remember even the little things could be a sign of cannabis use. The teen brain is still growing, making it more susceptible to the effects of THC, which can disrupt how memories form in the brain's **hippocampus** and cause forgetfulness.¹⁴

GETTING OFF-BALANCE

Athletic or not, cannabis can affect a teen's balance, coordination, and reaction time. THC can affect the brain's **cerebellum**, where all of our motor functions are developed and managed.¹⁴

FEELING MORE STRESS

Some teenage stress is normal, but cannabis use could be making it worse. That's because THC affects the brain's **amygdala**, which can impact a teen's ability to manage their emotions and cause anxiety.¹⁵



THC & Youth Health Risks

(PART 2)

STUDIES SHOW THAT CANNABIS CAN HARM TEEN MENTAL HEALTH

From school to social media, teens often experience stress and anxiety on a regular basis. Using weed to self-medicate has become a common coping method. But the fact is, teen use is linked to negative mental health effects.

2x more likely to have depression

Using weed can increase a teen's chance of developing mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and even thoughts of suicide.^{16,17,18}

4-7x more likely to become dependent

Teens who start using before age 18 are at higher risk of developing cannabis use disorder and may find it difficult to quit later in life, even if they experience negative impacts from cannabis.¹⁹



Cannabis can have long-lasting effects on teenage lungs

We all know smoke is harmful to lung health because of the toxins and carcinogens that are released. Even cannabis smoke contains chemicals like ammonia, hydrocyanic acid, nitrosamines, and many of the components of tar. When teens inhale all of that, they increase their risk of developing lung problems like chronic cough, bronchitis, and asthma.²⁰

Self-medicating with cannabis can come with risks

If you think a teen would benefit from medically prescribed cannabis, talk to a licensed healthcare professional before allowing them to use it. They will assess your child, discuss the possible risks, efficacy, and goals of the treatment, and track any progress or setbacks.²¹

Encourage teens to read about the risks of early cannabis use. A simple conversation can help protect their health.

Tips for Talking with Youth About Cannabis

SHOULD I TALK WITH A TEEN ABOUT CANNABIS?

NO MATTER HOW AWKWARD THE TALK MAY BE, TEENS REALLY ARE LISTENING

Use these tips to start the conversation:



Start early

Normalize talking about cannabis as children grow. Even if they haven't started asking questions yet, the sooner you explain the risks, the less likely they are to consider experimenting.



Keep it two-way

Instead of talking *at* teens, talk *with* them. Actively listening to their thoughts without judgment and encouraging questions helps show that you care.



Stick to the facts

Exaggerations may result in eye rolls. Base your conversation on science, like how teen cannabis use can impact brain growth and mental health.



Keep it casual

Family meetings and lectures can be intimidating for teens. Find casual moments, like in the car or on the way to school, to chat about cannabis.

DON'T SAY:

"Sit down. We need to talk."

"Because I said so."

"Everyone gets stressed, just deal with it."

DO SAY:

"Got a minute? I want to know what you think."

"Because I want the best for you, and science is starting to show risks for teens that use."

"I care about your mental health, and weed may actually make stress harder to handle."

How to Answer Tricky Questions About Cannabis

BE READY WITH ANSWERS FOR ALL THE HARD QUESTIONS—OR COMEBACKS THAT GET THROWN YOUR WAY

"Why can't I use weed if it's legal?"

Fast Facts: "Yes, but it's not legal for you yet because teen brains are still developing, and THC can disrupt that process."

Deep Dive: "Good question. Just because it's legal, doesn't mean it's safe for everyone. Your brain is still growing into your 20s, and if you use weed before then, THC can harm your hippocampus, cerebellum, and amygdala. That puts your memory, attention span, coordination, and mental health at risk."¹

"Why can't I use weed if it's natural?"

Fast Facts: "Even though it comes from a plant, cannabis contains a chemical called THC that can interfere with processes in your brain."

Deep Dive: "That doesn't mean it's safe for you right now. Because your brain is growing, the effects of THC are stronger and can impact how your brain functions. THC could make it harder for you to stay focused and manage stress, and it can even cause long-term damage."¹

"Aren't there worse things I could be doing, like tobacco or other drugs?"

Fast Facts: "Weed is a psychoactive substance that can have a big impact on your mood, motivation, and overall brain development."

Deep Dive: "Every substance is harmful in different ways, and using cannabis as a teen can come with risks. While your brain is growing, it's making new connections. Many substances, including weed, can interrupt that growth process and cause harm."¹

"How come you use weed, but I'm not allowed to?"

Fast Facts: "I only want the best for you and using as a teen is a big health risk."

Deep Dive: "Cannabis affects adults differently. Weed interrupts your brain's development and can cause long-lasting learning and memory problems.^{22,23,24,25,26,27,28} Using THC as a teen could affect your education and even lead to cannabis use disorder later."^{29,30}

How to Answer Tricky Questions About Cannabis (cont.)

"Didn't you use weed when you were young?"

Fast Facts: "Weed is much more potent today than when I was a teen. The effects are stronger and longer-lasting too."

Deep Dive: "I did, but back then we didn't know it could harm teen brains, and weed wasn't as strong. Cannabis today contains triple the amount of THC³¹ than what I used to use, and some edibles and oils can contain even more.^{32,33} Any amount of THC is harmful to your brain, but the higher concentrations in today's weed come with big impacts too."^{8,9}

"Isn't weed good for mental health?"

Fast Facts: "Medicinal cannabis might help, but self-medicating can be dangerous. We'd have to talk to a healthcare professional first."

Deep Dive: "Science is always evolving, and today we know a lot more about how weed affects teens. Self-medicating with cannabis comes with risks because THC can throw your body's natural chemical production out of balance, making feelings of stress and anxiety worse instead of better."¹⁵

"Doesn't it help you be more creative?"

Fast Facts: "When your brain is still growing, weed can actually interrupt the creative thought process³⁴ and hinder your overall creativity."

Deep Dive: "Everyone is different, and what you see on social media isn't always the full picture. Science shows that some forms of cannabis are so potent that it can actually impair creative problem-solving.³⁴ Avoiding cannabis use is the best way to let your brain grow to its full potential."¹

"What if my friends offer me weed? How do I say no?"

Fast Facts: "That can be tricky. Sometimes it's cool to be different, and if they're really your friends they'll respect your choice."

Deep Dive: "Sometimes a 'no thanks' can be enough. If it feels like they're pressuring you, you could say you're not ready to try it or give them the facts we've talked about. They may be impressed that you're standing up for yourself."

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Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Provides information on the risks of cannabis use

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Provides data, information, and FAQs on cannabis

Maine Crisis Line

Provides judgment-free support for parents

Good to Know Maine

Provides information on youth cannabis prevention