

Cannabis myths

How harmful is cannabis?

Cannabis myths and misconceptions

Does cannabis lead people to use hard drugs?

There are two theories that have become 'common currency' as understandings in relation to this question. While they actually propose different things, they are often misunderstood as being the same and are therefore mistakenly used interchangeably. To briefly outline the differences between the two, the stepping stone theory suggests that progression from so-called 'soft' drugs such as cannabis to so called 'hard' drugs like heroin is progressive and inevitable. The gateway theory draws on the metaphor of a series of gates through which an individual may pass. Each gateway leads to a different drug and new risks. In contrast to the stepping stone theory, the gateway theory does not propose an inevitable progression, but does propose the possibility of using various drugs.

In reality, the gateway theory seems to be far more credible. While it is certainly true that many of those who become heroin addicts, for example, have used cannabis, the vast majority of people in the UK (and elsewhere) who have used cannabis, have never used so-called harder drugs such as heroin or cocaine. This would suggest that progression from cannabis to so-called 'harder' drugs is in no way inevitable, in fact it is relatively rare.

Recent research by the Home Office also concluded that 'the association between harmful and less harmful drugs found in survey data is spurious' and that the gateway effects are probably 'very small'.

Is cannabis a soft drug?

Drugs are very often spoken about in terms of two broad categories - 'hard' and 'soft' drugs. So-called 'hard' drugs, such as heroin, cocaine and 'crack' cocaine, are described as 'hard' because they are associated with a number of potential dangers, such as addiction or other health risks including death. So-called 'soft' drugs are described as such because they are generally believed to entail a lesser degree of risk. These categories are, however, part of the misleading discourse on illicit drugs, as they do not stand up to examination. Many over-the-counter and prescribed drugs are addictive, carry significant side-effects and result in numerous fatalities each year. Likewise, both alcohol and tobacco, not considered to be 'drugs' at all by some, carry health risks and mortality rates that far exceed many illicit drugs including some of the 'harder' ones. Certainly some drugs are more harmful than others, but hard/soft terminology does not adequately or appropriately demonstrate this.

One consequence of the 'hard' - 'soft' dichotomy is that so-called 'soft' drugs may be seen as harmless in relation to the perceived risks of 'hard' drugs. Yet the use of 'soft' drugs, e.g. ecstasy, has been associated with a number of deaths in recent years (though the cause of such deaths is frequently misunderstood). The logic of the 'hard' - 'soft' dichotomy also suggests that legal substances - alcohol and tobacco - must be even less risky than so-called 'soft' drugs. Again, this is simply not true. It has been estimated that cigarettes alone account for well over 100,000 premature deaths per year in Britain. Alcohol is thought to cause around 28,000 excess deaths per year in England and Wales and 2,000,000 deaths per year worldwide. It is also the case that what are regarded as 'hard' and 'soft' drugs change according to time and place. In the 1950's, cannabis was associated with addiction and violence. Few people would associate this drug with such qualities today.

Is cannabis harmless?

Cannabis is considered to be a 'soft' drug by most people and, apart perhaps from the mistaken belief that it will lead to 'hard' drug use, it is seen by many as a fairly benign drug. However, this does not mean that the use of cannabis entails no health-risks.

It has been argued that cannabis smoke contains carcinogenic substances. The British Lung Foundation recently reported that smoking 3 cannabis 'joints' was equivalent to 20 cigarettes. When cannabis is smoked mixed with tobacco, the problems associated with tobacco smoking also become relevant. Cannabis smoking is also believed by some experts to be associated with conditions such as bronchitis. The point here is that as soon as you start to burn something and inhale that smoke a range of health risks are created. Evidence to cannabis's relative harm in this respect (compared to say cigarettes) is as yet contradictory.

Some experts believe that cannabis use must also be seen as involving some risk of dependence. It is clear however that while some individuals may suffer from problems not dissimilar in many ways to a dependence syndrome, for the majority of

users dependence is not an outcome and as such cannabis would not normatively be understood as a drug of addiction. In considering this issue, it is important to understand that dependence must be seen within the context of the drug in question, the individual in question and their social context. Dependence is, therefore, a relationship and is not simply a property of any given substance. Some drugs (heroin, cocaine, alcohol, tobacco) are more addictive than others - cannabis is less so.

One further issue pertaining to cannabis and the question of harm, relates to individuals with mental health issues. Although the evidence is not conclusive, some research has suggested that cannabis can stimulate mental health disorders such as schizophrenia. Put briefly, any 'mind altering substances' may involve additional problems for those with mental health problems.

References

Pudney, S. (2002) 'The road to ruin? Sequences of initiation into drug use and offending by young people and Britain.' Home Office.

Related Links:



[Does cannabis lead to taking other drugs?](#) This is the so-called 'escalation' hypothesis, or 'gateway theory'.

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