

Weed is Legal in CT, What's the Big Deal?

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Cannabis was made legal in Connecticut on July 1st, becoming the 19th State (the 21st inclusive of Washington DC and US territory of Guam). Many are concerned and speculating what this will mean for young people. My position is this: science is still science and THC is harmful to the developing adolescent and young adult brain. Many replicated studies have demonstrated an increase in serious psychiatric symptoms such as depression and psychosis in vulnerable youth with the use of high potency THC. Other longitudinal studies have shown serious impact in the memory system of the developing brain with regular use of THC.

Research from other States indicates that after an initial spike in "novelty," legal purchases by adults the overall rate of cannabis use remains relatively stable over time. Some studies have shown an increase in adult consumption after legalization however this is hard to calibrate specifically as some adults may only readily admit to a shift from the 'black market'.

In States that have had legal cannabis for more than two years the rate of adolescent use has not increased with legalization (Smart & Pacula 2019, Hall and Lynsky 2020). These results might not surprise many in that the legal age to purchase cannabis in CT and other states has been 21 and teens are already used to the illegal or black market for purchases. The existing data does not mean we should be passive and not worry that teens will increase use, the 2020 Monitoring the Future data shows an alarming increase in the use of high potency THC products by teens and young adults. Given that these products are readily available and easy to conceal (they come in small cartridges or "carts" and are used with devices often identical to nicotine "vape" devices).

The challenge for parents, clinicians, and leaders is to stay calm and focus on data and remind teens that even though alcohol and tobacco are legal in every state, use of these products is harmful, tobacco in any amount and alcohol in amounts larger than small doses. Cannabis is just another BORING drug in this same classification. *We must emphasize that just because something is legal DOES NOT make it safe or a good idea.*

There is a real risk of teen and young adult use of cannabis increasing serious psychiatric symptoms and illness that can continue even after young people quit cannabis. Insight Counseling (and many other providers nationwide) have observed and documented this phenomenon, with urine drug screens proving THC levels only in the patient's system.

What are Dabs? Dabs, also called 'wax' or 'Carts' refers to a paste created by drug dealers by adding butane to kilos of plant marijuana, mixing it in industrial mixers, and

extracting the "pure" THC molecules. Dabs are 70-90% THC and full of solvents as well. They have a dramatic effect on brain chemistry and the body in a very strong rapid and often dangerous way. Many teens do not even know what they are smoking the first time they smoke 'Dabs' and may feel overwhelmed by being "too high" unable to move or function for hours. Still, others will initially enjoy the intense 'high' but then experience severe psychiatric symptoms often resulting in high-risk behaviors.

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES

- A sweet young man jumped off a college dorm roof and was "saved" by becoming pinned between two air conditioning units after he had psychotic thoughts from a relatively small number of 'Dabs'. When he was rescued and came 'to' he described thinking his clothing was on fire and that he needed to jump. It took three weeks of antipsychotic therapy before he was fully back to normal.
- Another smart and vibrant young woman had strong impulses to hurt herself and perhaps kill herself using odd and violent means after smoking what she thought was a nicotine-filled Vape device. She began hyperventilating and screaming and was seen at the local hospital. Almost 36 hours later she was much better, but now needs regular care and medication.

Although the use of 'Dabs' and wax are causing many of these acute situations, the use of 'edibles' that ARE LEGAL in the states that allow retail cannabis sales are also causing major psychiatric issues. When people digest cannabis a unique process of metabolizing THC happens causing an increased effect of the equivalent dose of THC when smoked or inhaled. The effects of eating THC also last much longer sometimes for 6 or 8 hours. The candies, cookies, and other products if not eaten in the recommended doses will give an overwhelming dose of THC to the nervous system in naive users.

Most teens will not eat the recommended 'one gummy bear' dose of edible THC and after three doses taken innocently, they are having similar reactions to what I described above. The extreme psychiatric symptoms are what we call "dose-related" to THC levels.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

What can parents and professionals do? We must very actively educate young teens on the real facts regarding the high potential for both addiction and adverse psychiatric symptoms related to these high-dose THC products.

Parents also have to 'firm up' their no use messages to teens, as many parents are feeling they are not able to impact their child's use of weed at all. Research consistently demonstrates that parents' strong, firm but caring disapproval of any risky behavior has

a major impact on teen's behaviors. It is particularly daunting now as it appears our culture is accepting weed as 'normal' and the latest fantasy cure to medical and financial woes, but again our caring, firm and consistent messages do make a difference even as our kids roll their eyes and seem to not be listening.

If your child is receiving psychiatric care for any extreme symptoms, please make sure they are being lab tested for THC as well. Many mental health practitioners are not yet fully aware of the impact and prevalence of high potency THC products on psychiatric illnesses. Many of our clients have a remarkable improvement in symptoms simply by becoming abstinent from cannabis and other drugs. Your child may be greatly helped by dual diagnosis care that addresses the use of drugs in the role of psychiatric symptoms.

I have found that young people themselves, when given the data in a reasoned and careful manner agree that high potency THC products have caused them unwanted symptoms, from the simple "I just got way too high" to "I couldn't stop my thoughts." When I speak at schools (a non-clinical population) many teens come up to me afterward, very concerned about the data on "Dabs" and willing to make changes. Parents - speak to your children! Even when they may not have the extreme reactions described above, they do see the risk of high potency THC and they will hear you!

A 17-year-old boy in our practice recently told me, "I thought you guys were exaggerating, but I really feel so much better now that I am not dabbing. My thinking was really dark and selfish, and I did not believe it was the Dabs."

Please send me your questions and concerns at Liz@Insightcounselingllc.com

For more sources of data and talking points try:

[Johnny's Ambassadors Cannabis Curriculum for teens](#): I am supporting an innovative non-profit started by grieving parents after their son had a psychotic episode after cannabis use. They have collected extensive data to share with young people:

<http://insightcounselingllc.com/2018/10/15/the-parent-teen-weed-wars-what-parents-can-do/>

<https://teens.drugabuse.gov/blog/post/dabbing-dangerous>

<https://drugfree.org/article/how-to-talk-about-marijuana/>