

Refuse, Remove, Reasons: The Gateway Drug Theory

On the Video...

While more kids than ever are abusing prescription medicine and marijuana remains the number one drug of abuse, the debate continues: do the so-called "soft" drugs lead kids to use "harder" drugs like cocaine or heroin?

What do teens think... is marijuana a gateway drug?

"I don't think so," says 18-year-old Katie.

"I just have known kids who have done it and they don't do anything else," adds Randy, age 17.

"I don't think it's gonna lead them into anything bigger," 17-year-old Cody says.

But a study in the Journal of the American Medical Association suggests these teens are wrong.

The study examined 311 sets of twins, with one twin in each set having smoked marijuana before age 17.

"And what they found is that the twin who began smoking marijuana at a much earlier age had a very high increase in the probability that that twin would go on to use other drugs other than marijuana," says Dr. Robert Margolis, an addiction specialist.

"As for me, it led within about a month period to other drugs," says Kelly, age 18.

Kelly says smoking pot got her closer to people who used hard drugs.

"And it's like, 'Hey, you like the way this made you feel? Try this, you know?' And I was up for it, you know, part of me was like OK, if I say no, you know they won't think I'm cool anymore," she says.

Experts say pot also releases dopamine in the brain, just like harder drugs do.

"So if marijuana triggers the release of dopamine and cocaine triggers the release of dopamine and heroin triggers the release of dopamine, it makes sense that smoking marijuana may be priming the brain, getting the brain ready for these other drugs," Dr. Margolis says.

But experts say many kids – and their parents – think marijuana is virtually harmless.

"Don't just say, 'Oh, it's only marijuana,'" Dr. Margolis says.

Instead, parents should arm themselves with information from credible sources and send a strong message to kids: Marijuana is illegal, unhealthy and could very well be a gateway to other drugs.

"I know that it is, and anyone that thinks that it isn't, it's kind of sad to say this, but wait and find out ... you probably will, you know," Kelly says.

What We Need to Know...

Marijuana, the most often used illegal drug in this country, is a green or gray mixture of dried, shredded flowers and leaves of the hemp plant. It is addictive and is known to have both short- and long-term negative effects on the body, from short-term memory, learning and problem-solving issues to longer-term effects like cancer, immune system and reproductive system issues.

According to a National Household Survey on Drug Use, 2.7 million Americans aged 12 and older used illicit drugs at least once in the month prior to being surveyed. Of those, the majority, 56.2 said their first drug was marijuana. The age of first use on average is 17.6 years of age.

As a parent, you have the most influence over your teen's choice to use drugs. Therefore, it is important that you address the topic of drug use early on and often. The Partnership At Drug-Free.org offers these additional strategies for preventing drug use in your teen:

- Be involved in your teen's life. Ask who, what, when and where: Know who your teen's friends are, what your teen is doing, when he or she will be home and where he or she is going.
- Spend quality time. Eat dinner together, listen to music, watch a ball game or share chores.
- Set a firm rule of no drug use in your family.
- Commit yourself to a drug-free lifestyle. Be your teen's most important role model.
- Share your values. Sometimes it's as simple as letting your teen know that you don't want him or her using marijuana.

How can you recognize if your teen is using marijuana? The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) suggests looking for the following physical signs in your teen: Seems dizzy and has trouble walking; seems silly and giggles for no reason; has very red, bloodshot eyes; has a hard time remembering things that just happened; becomes very sleepy as the early effects of use begin to fade.

If you suspect that your teen has a drug problem, it is important that you seek immediate treatment. Consult a psychiatrist or mental health professional when making decisions about substance abuse treatment for your teen. Remember that recovery from an addiction is a long-term process and may require frequent and multiple episodes of treatment.

Conversation Starters...

- Some teens smoke pot to experiment; some teens smoke pot to get away from the stress and anxiety in their life. What causes stress in your life? How do you handle it – and how can I help?
- Like underage drinking, smoking marijuana is illegal. What risks does any illegal activity place on our family? How does that make you feel?
- How does smoking marijuana interfere with the things our family does to try to live a healthy life?