

A circular photograph of three young people of diverse backgrounds smiling. A woman with a red headband is on the left, a young man with curly hair is in the center, and a young woman is on the right.

let's  
**talk**  
cannabis

***MENTORS AND  
COMMUNITY LEADERS  
TOOLKIT***



## INFORMATION FOR MENTORS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

This toolkit provides you with evidence-based information and tips for having ongoing conversations with teens about the harms and risks of underage cannabis use.

Questions? Please contact the Youth Cannabis Prevention Initiative at [Cannabis@cdph.ca.gov](mailto:Cannabis@cdph.ca.gov).

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# WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TEENS AND CANNABIS



## Teens Are Getting Mixed Signals About the Risks of Cannabis Use

Conflicting information about cannabis makes it difficult for teens to know how much of a risk it truly is. Many teens learn about cannabis through social media where “influencers”—and the cannabis industry—advertise it as having health benefits.

Teens might be aware that adult use is legalized in many states. As of November 2022, 39 states in the U.S. have legalized medical marijuana use and 18 states have legalized adult use. Cannabis is also seen as being a way to cope with stress.

At the same time, many teens receive messages that demonize cannabis. So, what are they supposed to think? This inconsistency makes it hard for them to evaluate the risks and consequences of cannabis use.

According to a 2020 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration report, about 1 in 10 adolescents, ages 12 to 17, have used cannabis within the past year.<sup>1</sup>

## You Can Help Guide Teens

That’s where you come in. It’s crucial that mentors and community leaders know how to discuss cannabis use with teens and tweens. It can be a challenging topic, but research shows that you can significantly influence a teen’s decision to use drugs. This Community Toolkit is designed to provide you with the facts, science, and tools you need to have thoughtful, productive, and effective conversations with teens about cannabis.

## In California, Many Teens Don’t Think Cannabis Is Dangerous<sup>2</sup>

- 16% of 11th graders are current cannabis users.
- Cannabis use is more common than either binge drinking or smoking.



# THE RISKS

Substances like cannabis can negatively affect the teen body in many ways. Research shows that cannabis may:

- Impair learning, memory, attention, decision-making, and motivation, which can affect school performance<sup>3</sup>
- Increase the risk of chronic cough, bronchitis, and asthma severity<sup>4</sup>
- Increase the risk of schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders in adulthood, with the highest risk among those who begin using at a young age, especially among individuals who may already be at risk because of genetics<sup>3</sup>

## YOUR INFLUENCE

What you say and do matters. If you avoid having conversations about cannabis, teens in your life might think the topic is off limits. It's better to let them know they can openly discuss it with you. That way they'll receive the necessary information to make healthy decisions.



In fact, talking with teens about cannabis use at a young age is one of the best ways that you can help prevent early experimentation.<sup>5,6</sup>

### What You Can Do:

- Educate yourself on the risks of underage cannabis use.
- Start the conversation early on, and talk often about making safe and healthy choices.
- Model healthy and safe behaviors.
- Provide and discuss ways to say no to cannabis.
- Ensure the teen in your life knows you disapprove of underage cannabis use.

# CANNABIS 101



Cannabis—also known as marijuana, pot, kush, and weed, among other names—is a psychoactive drug from the cannabis plant. Since November 2016, cannabis has been legal for nonmedical use in California for those ages 21 and over. With an increasing presence in our society, it’s important to understand the basics of cannabis, the laws surrounding it, and the potency of the plant.

## Common Ways Cannabis Is Used

**Smoking:** Cannabis is rolled into a joint or smoked using a pipe.

**Edibles:** Cannabis is infused into food or beverages.

**Vaping/Concentrates:** Cannabis is extracted into potent oils and waxes.

**Topicals:** Cannabis is infused into lotions, salves, and sprays and applied to the skin.

[Click here to find out more ways cannabis is used](#)

## Cannabis Potency



Today, cannabis is much stronger than in past decades. Modern cannabis plants contain higher amounts of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main psychoactive compound in the plant that gives users the sensation of feeling “high.” The higher the THC content, the stronger the effects on your brain and behavior.

# HEALTH RISKS FOR TEENS

## THC and the Brain

The brain doesn’t fully develop until you’re in your mid-20s. THC is believed to affect the teen brain in the following ways:

- Problems with memory, learning, thinking clearly, and problem-solving<sup>3</sup>
- Poor school performance that jeopardizes professional and social achievements, and life satisfaction<sup>3</sup>
- Impaired coordination and reaction time<sup>3</sup>
- Increased risk of mental health problems like depression, anxiety, and psychosis<sup>1,3</sup>

When THC enters the brain, it binds to receptors in the endocannabinoid system (the brain's natural system that regulates and creates a balance of body and brain functions). This prevents the brain from regulating things like memory, coordination/alertness, coping with stress, and managing anxiety.

### THC is believed to affect the teen brain in the following ways:

- Heavy exposure to THC can reduce the production of dopamine (the chemical in the body responsible for allowing you to feel pleasure, satisfaction, and motivation), which can make you feel less motivated.<sup>3,7</sup>
- THC can affect the part of the brain that forms memories.<sup>3</sup>
- THC may affect the part of the brain responsible for motor function and its development.<sup>3</sup>
- THC can affect the part of the brain responsible for emotional regulation, making anxiety and stress harder to manage.<sup>3</sup>



## THC and Mental Health

These days, teens are facing amounts of stress and anxiety like never before. As cannabis use has been growing in popularity following legalization, teens may see cannabis as a way to cope with their stress. Check out the effects that cannabis can have on a teen's mental health below:

- 1** Adolescent cannabis exposure and use are associated with:<sup>1,3,7</sup>
  - A risk for later psychotic disorders in adulthood
  - Dependency and addiction for those who use cannabis to cope with negative emotions
- 2** THC has been shown to affect the part of the brain responsible for emotional regulation, making it harder for teens to manage stress and anxiety.<sup>3</sup>
- 3** High amounts of cannabis use can affect tolerance levels, making teens who use less sensitive to THC, meaning more THC is needed to feel the same effects.<sup>8</sup>

## Cannabis and the Lungs

Like tobacco, smoking cannabis can have lasting effects on teen lungs. Cannabis smoke even has many of the same harmful chemicals found in tobacco smoke and, when inhaled, can increase the risk of developing lung problems. Smoking cannabis on a regular basis has been linked to chronic bronchitis, wheezing, exercise-induced shortness of breath, chest tightness, cough, and mucus production.

[Click here to learn more about cannabis health effects](#)



# BEST PRACTICES FOR TALKING WITH TEENS



No matter their age, it's important to have ongoing conversations with the teens in your life about using cannabis. If you can, it's a good idea to have talks about use early, before they consider experimenting. But talking with them at any age and at any stage still makes a difference. Follow the tips below so you're ready to engage in productive, healthy, and supportive conversations about cannabis.

## How to Start a Conversation

Knowing how and when to start conversations about cannabis (or any drug) with teens can be challenging. The most effective way to reach them is by having open, honest, two-way conversations about the risks.

### Talk early and often:

- Start the conversation early, if possible, even before the teens in your life start to think about experimenting, when they first start asking questions.
- Stay involved, and keep the conversation going as they grow. Discussions about cannabis (or any other drug) use should not be a one-time thing. They should be ongoing because risk factors for substance use can change and multiply over time as teens deal with the different trials and pressures of adolescence.



### Be casual but clear:

- Have casual conversations instead of lectures or interventions.
- Choose informal times to talk, like during community events or at meal-sharing opportunities.
- Look for natural opportunities to talk about cannabis with teens, like when you hear weed mentioned in a song or see people using it at events.
- Be consistently clear on where you stand to help set an example.

## Be open, and listen without judgment:

- Listen carefully to the teen in your life without judgment. Ask open-ended questions that encourage them to elaborate. Having a genuine conversation lets them know they can come to you whenever they have questions or problems.
- Correct any misconceptions teens may have, such as “everyone smokes weed” or “marijuana won’t hurt me.”
- Address and acknowledge their comments so they know you’re paying attention and understand them.
- Let them know they can always come to you if they’re in trouble and that their safety and well-being is your number one priority.

## Keep it grounded and fact-based:

- Focus on the facts, and discuss how cannabis use might affect them.
- Teens know when you are trying to exaggerate information or trying to scare them, so focus on real-life situations and believable consequences.

## If you suspect a teen in your life is using, don’t panic:

- Stay calm. Overreacting may lead the teen to rebel, feel resentment, or take greater risks.
- Seek to understand and empathize with their reason for using. Help them explore safer and healthier alternatives.
- Talk about their concerns, and give positive reasons for wanting them to stop using cannabis.
- Keep the conversation open so you can problem-solve.





## Let them know you care and are always there for them:

- By maintaining a strong, open relationship with the teen in your life, they may be less likely to be influenced by outside sources.
- Creating a supportive and nurturing environment can help them make better decisions.

## Help them say “no”:

- Helping the teen in your life deal with peer pressure can prevent them from using drugs.
- Let them know they can say “no” if they’re put in a situation that makes them uncomfortable.
- Work with the teen to think of a way to handle this situation, whether it’s simply saying, “no, I don’t smoke,” or “I have a game tomorrow,” or “I have to go to work tomorrow.”

## How to Respond

Once you’ve opened the conversation about cannabis with your teen, they may have questions or comments that are hard to address. Read through these frequent teen comments so you’re prepared to respond in the moment.

### If your teen says, “But it’s natural,” you can say:

“Just because it’s natural, it still doesn’t mean it’s safe for you to use. Your brain won’t stop developing until you’re in your mid-20s. Using weed now can impact your memory, stress, and anxiety.”

**More info:** The THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) in cannabis can affect teen brains by impacting their memory, stress, and anxiety.”<sup>3</sup>

### If your teen says, “But it’s not as bad as tobacco or other drugs,” you can say:

“As your brain develops, it is expertly fine-tuning its connections, and many substances—including cannabis—can disrupt the brain’s developmental process.”

**More info:** The developing brain fine-tunes connections in the brain’s gray and white matter.<sup>9</sup> The science on THC and teens shows that it is possible THC can disrupt the brain’s developmental process—how big an impact this may have on the teen brain is not yet clear”<sup>3</sup>

### If your teen says, “But it’s legal,” you can say:

“The legal age of cannabis use in California is 21 and above.”

**More info:** Find out more about California’s cannabis laws [here](#).

**If your teen says, “But vaping isn’t harmful,” you can say:**

“Vaping with weed can still expose you to toxins that can affect your health.”

**More info:** When vaping, teens can still inhale toxic metals and chemicals from the heating chamber, which can affect their overall health.<sup>10</sup>

**If your teen says, “But so many successful people use it,” you can say:**

“What people post on social media doesn’t show a full picture of their life. Cannabis could be causing problems for them that they’re not even aware of. The best way to let your brain grow to its full potential is to avoid underage cannabis use.

**More info:** The teen brain does not stop developing until their mid-20s.<sup>3</sup>

**If your teen says, “But you used when you were young,” you can say:**

“Cannabis is stronger now than it used to be, which can affect your brain and may make cannabis addictive.”

**More info:** Cannabis today is stronger than in the past as it contains higher levels of THC, which can harm the teen brain and make cannabis addictive.<sup>3</sup>

**If your teen says, “But I saw you use,” you can say:**

“Using cannabis underage puts your brain development at risk. That means your memory, attention, coordination, and mental health could be affected.”

**More info:** Human brains do not fully develop until our mid-20s, and large amounts of THC in the brain can impact normal functions like learning, memory, attention, coordination, and mental health regulation.<sup>3</sup>



# DOWNLOADS AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES



Click on each link for quick access to the facts about cannabis, and download the materials to print and reference for future use—and to share with your community.

### Fact Sheet Downloads

[Cannabis and the Developing Brain](#) ↓

[Cannabis and Teen Mental Health](#) ↓

[How to Respond](#) ↓

### For Even More Information About Cannabis, Check Out:

#### [Let's Talk Cannabis California](#)

Provides facts, tips, and 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 frequently asked questions (FAQs) on cannabis





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