

Introduction

Clearing the Smoke from Cannabis

Cannabis is here to stay. For our own generation, it has never left us. As prohibition is loosening its grip, a rosy dawn is shining a new light upon cannabis. Winding down its fight to suppress a plant that grows like a weed, society is finally learning to live with it. With its social acceptance growing, more of us will be smoking it, and more of us will be admitting it. And for those of us who have long smoked cannabis, it is high time for us to learn how to reduce its health risks because the way that most of us take a hit of pot can also take a hit on our health.

Drugs that we use and might even need provide us with some clear benefits, otherwise we would not use them. But cloaked as side effects, those welcomed rewards also come with unwanted risks. In contrast to the fears of reefer madness portrayed during the twentieth century, nowadays many people view cannabis as harmless. While indeed less harmful than other drugs, cannabis does not come without some hazards. Whether medicinal or recreational, whether herbal or pharmaceutical, whether illegal or legit, all drugs pose risks.

All forms of smoke pose risks. Whether campfire smoke, or burnt toast smoke, or sage smudge stick smoke, all smoke presents health risks. Smoke up a drug, and you've stirred up some double trouble. Cannabis is celebrated as a natural herb, but intentionally inhaling its smoke is inherently an unnatural act that can compromise your physical health. Even as an herbal remedy that can lift your mood and treat a long list of ailments, it is better to not allow its smoke to add another ailment to that list. Smoke in any quantity and from any source irritates

the respiratory tract. Smoke is its own smoking gun—without any gun. You might ignore the facts or kid yourself about smoking, but no smoke and mirrors can deceive your lungs. Even incense, which fools the nose, fouls the lungs.

That smoking is bad for your health is old news, but some good news has arrived for most of us. We now can choose from among many alternatives to smoking. Both traditional and innovative methods for delivering the active ingredients in cannabis, called cannabinoids, include processing into alcohol tinctures, oil extracts, flower essences, oral sprays, topical creams, transdermal patches, sublingual strips, time-released capsules, eyedrops, tablets, waxes, salves, and a whole smorgasbord of edibles. Even the cannabinoids themselves, especially tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD), have been isolated and concentrated and marketed. As some of us may reside in states or nations whose drug laws are still stuck in the twentieth century, we might be banished from ready access to this treasure trove of more healthful alternatives.

Even when we do have legal access to these alternatives, most of us still prefer to smoke cannabis in its whole and natural form as a dried flower wrapped in a few of its enveloping leaves. Street lingo calls that “bud,” short for flower bud. Some of us may prefer the flower simply because we cannot afford the more expensive derivatives and concentrates or the technology required to effectively consume them. Others may prefer smoking because the high or the relief comes on quickly, within just a minute or two. When you so promptly know you’ve had enough, you can easily avoid having too much. And too much of a good thing is rarely a good thing.

So we continue to puff on joints or pipes or herbal vaporizers. The traditional bud form thus outsells all other cannabis products available in dispensaries and pot shops alike. And in the underground marketplace, flower power reigns supreme. One survey published in 2016 found that nine out of ten adults who imbibed still preferred the herbal form of cannabis.¹ Another published in 2020 yielded similar results.² If it were a television ad, its off-camera narrator would announce, “Four out of every five cannabis consumers recommend smoking or vaping dried herb over all other methods of delivering cannabinoids.”

In the same tradition of dilution and moderation, those who consume alcohol drink more beer and wine than they do hard liquors. If you get