

Rescheduling Marijuana: What Parents Need to Know

By Marcia Lee Taylor

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Recent news headlines warn that the federal government may be on the verge of reclassifying marijuana as a less dangerous substance. While a final decision has not yet been announced, parents need to know what this rescheduling may mean and how to discuss it with their teens and young adults.

What Rescheduling Marijuana Means

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has recommended that marijuana be moved from Schedule I to Schedule III. Schedule I is for drugs with a high potential for abuse and no currently accepted medical use; Schedule III is for drugs with a potential for abuse that also have currently accepted medical use. The Drug Enforcement Administration is currently reviewing HHS's recommendation and will make the final decision about whether to make the change. While the recreational (non-medical) use of marijuana would remain illegal under federal law, the impact of reclassification would be significant, nonetheless.

Grouping marijuana with other substances – such as anabolic steroids and Tylenol with codeine -- deemed to have a low potential for dependence ignores science and sends an inaccurate message to young people that marijuana is less harmful than we know it to be. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, about 30 percent of people who use marijuana have marijuana use disorder, and those who begin using before the age of 18 are 4 to 7 times as likely to develop marijuana use disorder. A 2019 study showed that 1 in 5 who use marijuana have experienced hallucinations and more than half have had episodes of paranoia. Marijuana use is also associated with a negative impact on the developing brain, an increase in suicidality, increased anxiety and mood disorders, lower IQ, and increased high school dropout rates. In addition, marijuana-induced psychosis is becoming much more prevalent as marijuana potency skyrockets.

Changing marijuana's federal classification would supersize the already strong cannabis industry by exempting it from Section 280E of the tax code, allowing companies to deduct regular business expenses, including advertising costs. Being free from this tax provision will make the \$34 billion cannabis industry enormously profitable and incentivize them to advertise and market their product even more, including to teens and young adults. With this, we can expect marijuana sales to grow exponentially, and harms associated with marijuana use to rise in tandem.

Big Tobacco taught us all too well the deleterious impact of advertising on youth: the more teens are exposed to tobacco advertising, the more likely they are to start smoking. And the same will be true with marijuana. The cannabis industry will undoubtedly take a page out of Big Tobacco's marketing playbook, making marijuana use look glamorous and benign with celebrity endorsements, candy flavoring (which we are already seeing in marijuana edibles), product placement in movies, and more.

Perhaps most alarming: even without the expected deluge of ads and slick marketing, marijuana use is at an all-time high. Teen use of marijuana is at a 30-year high, with more teens reporting smoking marijuana than tobacco. Among young adults 19 to 30, 26% used in the past month compared to 17% in 2011, and 11% were daily users, up from 6% in 2011.

What Rescheduling Means for Families

Given the dangers inherent in marijuana use and the already high prevalence of use, federal reclassification and the trumpeting of that change by the industry will only make it more difficult for parents to discourage their teens and young adults from using marijuana. Despite remaining illegal at the federal level, the onslaught of advertising and marketing will further normalize marijuana and minimize the known dangers of its use.

Here are a few things that families can do to help keep their kids make healthy decisions:

- Make sure that teens and young adults know that no matter the legal status of marijuana, it is dangerous for their developing brain. According to a study from Columbia University, teens who use marijuana recreationally – even if they don't meet the criteria for a cannabis use disorder -- are 2 to 4 times as likely to develop mental disorders, including depression and suicidality, as teens who don't use marijuana.
- Make your household rules about marijuana use clear.

- Help your teen with refusal skills so they will know what they will say if offered substances.
- Make sure your teen has healthy coping skills so they are less likely to turn to substances to manage emotions.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Kids are going to be exposed to marijuana and you want them to feel comfortable talking to you about it without fear of retribution.

Talking to kids about the dangers of marijuana in the current environment can feel like trying to swim upstream. Let's hope that the federal government does not do anything to make parents' jobs any harder than they already are.

Editor's Note: A response from SAM about the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' recommendation to reschedule marijuana [can be found here](#).