



Keep the Holidays Joyful: Learn About Marijuana Edibles and Kids

By Dr. Gary Kirkilas

Dr. Kirkilas is a general pediatrician with a unique practice. His office is a 35-foot mobile medical unit that travels to various homeless shelters in Phoenix providing free medical care to families and teens. He also serves as a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics, giving commentary on trending pediatric issues in the media. As a spokesperson, he is often called to speak on the effects of cannabis advertising on children and has written extensively on the topic. He has worked alongside legislators in several states in their attempt to restrict cannabis advertising that targets children.

It's hard to believe the holiday season is just around the corner. Soon we will be consumed with holiday music, movies, lights, breaks from school and large family gatherings all of which help make this a special time of year. With all the hustle and bustle of the holiday season parents can sometimes forget that there are some dangerous treats circulating in our community that can make their way into young children's and teens' hands. With a little parental education, being available for important conversations and maintaining open lines of communication, you can make sure the holiday season stays merry and bright.

Unfortunately, with the legalization of recreational cannabis, different forms of cannabis are making their way into children's hands. Particularly worrisome are cannabis edibles like gummy bears, lollipops, cookies, and brownies, all of which are made to look and taste like regular childhood treats. The gummies, which are the most popular among youth, often come in flavors like "Candy Apple" and in bright colors which are highly enticing to small children. They can be purchased from state licensed dispensaries, but teens have found ways to purchase them over the internet/social media and delivered right to their door! It comes as no surprise then that several states with commercially available cannabis have seen a 200%-700% increase in poison control calls and emergency room visits due to cannabis intoxication.

Many times, these intoxications result from either accidental or purposeful ingestion of cannabis edibles. Young children, most commonly ages 1 to 4, will put anything and everything into their mouth, especially if it appears to look like colorful candy. These children are frequently encountering either their parents' or an older teenage sibling's cannabis gummies within the home. Additionally, teenagers who are experimenting with cannabis, can get themselves into trouble by unknowingly consuming large doses of THC, the psychoactive component in cannabis gummies. These gummies come in a wide variety of dosages, anywhere from 5 mg to 1000 mg per gummy. Five milligrams is typically enough to cause a teenager to feel intoxicated. However, a teen could easily consume two to five gummies in one sitting, each containing anywhere from 5 mg to 1000mg of THC. In these cases, they will consume intoxicating levels of THC in a short period of time.

Signs and symptoms of cannabis intoxication include: a racing heartbeat, altered level of consciousness (i.e., suddenly appearing very tired, confused), loss of coordination or even acute psychosis including hallucinations, delusions, and paranoia. Should any of these symptoms occur to a loved one, a visit to the emergency room is a must. Most of these cases are managed in the emergency room but up to 22% required hospital admission for their intoxication, some of which require care in the intensive care unit.

We would be remiss to not also discuss cannabinoid hyperemesis syndrome (CHS). This has been seen in adolescents with a history of heavy, long-term use of cannabis. They present with severe nausea with cycles of unremitting vomiting that is relieved by taking hot showers.

Prevention starts with communication, so regular discussions about the dangers of cannabis should start at an early age. For younger children, making sure they understand that they should never take any candy from a friend/family member without showing and asking a parent first. Explain that sometimes candy can contain dangerous substances that can make children very sick. For teens, the same advice applies with a couple of caveats. First, it's important to give honest, fact-based advice in your discussion and not resort to solely a fear-based over-emphasis on health effects of cannabis. Instead focus on the potential health risks that cannabis-use involves. Second, your discussion should not be an interrogation. Teens will feel threatened and not take to heart all of your advice. Instead, focus on the topic of the dangers of cannabis instead of whether they or their friends are using cannabis. End with the fact that you want to be a trusted source of information that they can come to whenever they have questions about cannabis. If you can create these open lines of communication,

you and your family will fare far better and make sure this joyous time is free from any unnecessary trips to the emergency room.