CONDITION

Marijuana intoxication

Marijuana intoxication is a temporary change in thinking, coordination, mood, and body functions after using THC-containing cannabis

WHAT IT IS
Temporary effects caused by recent THC exposure

BODY SYSTEM
Nervous system, heart and circulation

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Altered perception, poor coordination, anxiety, sleepiness

WHAT CAUSES IT
THC affecting brain and body signaling

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Symptoms, history, examination, sometimes toxicology testing

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care, reassurance, and monitoring

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - effects usually wear off

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - chest pain, seizures, breathing trouble, or unresponsiveness

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Most recover fully after effects wear off

Overview

Marijuana intoxication means the temporary effects that happen after using cannabis containing tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC. THC is the main cannabis chemical that causes a "high." Cannabis is another name for marijuana.

THC changes signaling in areas of the brain involved in memory, judgment, movement, perception, and mood. It can also affect heart rate and blood pressure. The experience may feel relaxing or pleasant, but it can also cause anxiety, confusion, or loss of coordination.

The effects differ widely. They are influenced by how much THC was taken, the strength of the product, how it entered the body, and whether alcohol or other drugs were also used. A person's age, health, previous cannabis use, and surroundings can also matter.

Inhaled cannabis usually begins acting within minutes. Edible products take longer because THC must pass through the digestive system and liver. This delay makes it easier to take more before the first amount has taken effect. Edible intoxication may also last longer than expected.

Most uncomplicated episodes improve with time and supportive care. However, severe symptoms, accidental exposure in a child, or possible exposure to other substances may require urgent assessment.

Symptoms

Marijuana intoxication can affect thoughts, emotions, movement, and physical sensations. Possible symptoms include:

Some people develop a panic reaction. This may include intense fear, shaking, sweating, rapid breathing, or the feeling that something terrible is happening.

High THC exposure can cause marked confusion, severe agitation, hallucinations, or psychosis. Psychosis means losing contact with reality, such as hearing or seeing things that are not present or developing strongly held false beliefs.

Children may become very sleepy, unsteady, confused, or less responsive after accidental exposure. Because of their smaller size, even part of an edible can cause substantial effects. Older adults may be more vulnerable to falls, confusion, and changes in blood pressure.

Synthetic cannabinoids, sometimes sold under names such as "Spice" or "K2," are not the same as cannabis. Their effects are less predictable and can be much more severe.

- Feeling unusually relaxed, happy, anxious, fearful, or suspicious
- Slower reactions, poor balance, or reduced coordination
- Trouble concentrating, remembering, or judging risk
- Altered awareness of time, sounds, colours, or surroundings
- Sleepiness, dizziness, dry mouth, or red eyes
- Increased appetite
- A fast heartbeat
- Nausea or vomiting

Causes and risk factors

Marijuana intoxication is caused by recent exposure to THC. It can follow smoking, vaping, eating, or drinking a THC-containing product. THC can also be absorbed from concentrated oils or other cannabis preparations.

Factors that increase the chance of intense or prolonged effects include:

Product labels may not always reflect the exact THC content. Homemade foods can contain uneven amounts, so one portion may be stronger than another.

Cannabidiol, or CBD, does not usually produce the typical THC high. However, some CBD products contain THC because of labeling errors, contamination, or the way the product was manufactured.

- Using a product with a high THC concentration
- Taking more of an edible before its delayed effects begin
- Having little or no previous experience with cannabis
- Mixing cannabis with alcohol, sedatives, or other drugs
- Using cannabis while taking medicines that cause sleepiness
- Being a child, an older adult, or medically frail
- Having a history of panic, psychosis, or certain heart problems

Diagnosis

Marijuana intoxication is usually diagnosed from the pattern of symptoms, a history of recent exposure, and a physical examination. There is no single test that proves how impaired someone is at that moment.

A clinician may check alertness, coordination, heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, and blood sugar. Other tests may be needed when symptoms are severe, the substance is uncertain, an injury occurred, or another medical problem could explain the changes.

Urine or blood testing can sometimes show exposure to THC. These tests have important limits. THC or its breakdown products can remain detectable after the noticeable effects have ended, especially after frequent use. A positive result does not, by itself, prove current intoxication or show exactly when cannabis was used.

Symptoms such as confusion, collapse, chest pain, or unusual behaviour can have other causes. These include low blood sugar, infection, head injury, stroke, medication effects, or exposure to another drug. Medical assessment focuses on not missing these possibilities.

Treatment and management

Time and supportive care are the main treatments for uncomplicated marijuana intoxication. There is no specific antidote that removes THC from the body.

A calm, quiet setting may reduce fear and overstimulation. A trusted sober adult can stay nearby, offer reassurance, and watch for worsening symptoms. Someone who is fully awake and able to swallow safely may take small amounts of water.

The person should not drive, cycle in traffic, operate machinery, swim alone, cook over an open flame, or make important decisions while impaired. Feeling less "high" does not always mean reaction time and judgment have fully returned.

Coffee, cold showers, exercise, and vomiting do not reliably speed recovery. Alcohol and other drugs may worsen sleepiness, poor judgment, vomiting, or loss of coordination. Do not make someone vomit after an accidental edible exposure.

In a medical setting, treatment may include monitoring, fluids, treatment for severe nausea, or medication for dangerous agitation or intense anxiety. The exact care depends on the symptoms and whether another substance or medical condition may be involved.

For accidental exposure, a poison information service can advise whether home observation or medical assessment is appropriate. In the United States, Poison Control is available at 1-800-222-1222. Elsewhere, use the local poison centre.

Complications

Most episodes end without lasting harm, but intoxication can lead to problems while judgment and coordination are reduced.

Falls, burns, drowning, road crashes, and other injuries are important risks. Combining cannabis with alcohol can increase impairment beyond either substance alone.

Anxiety may become severe enough to cause panic or unsafe behaviour. Hallucinations or psychosis can occur, especially after high THC exposure or in people who are vulnerable to psychotic illness. Symptoms that continue after the expected intoxication period need medical assessment.

Cannabis can temporarily increase heart rate and alter blood pressure. Chest pain, fainting, or severe shortness of breath should not be assumed to be "just cannabis," particularly in someone with heart or circulation problems.

Repeated vomiting can cause dehydration. Recurrent episodes of severe vomiting in someone

who uses cannabis regularly may be related to cannabinoid hyperemesis syndrome, which is a separate condition associated with long-term cannabis use.

Frequent cannabis use can lead to tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, or cannabis use disorder. Cannabis use disorder means continuing to use despite significant problems or finding it difficult to control use. One episode of intoxication does not, by itself, mean someone has an addiction.

Prevention

Marijuana intoxication can be prevented by not using THC-containing products. If cannabis is used, the risk of unexpected intoxication can be reduced, although not removed.

Avoid mixing cannabis with alcohol, sedatives, or other drugs. Check labels carefully and avoid taking more while waiting for an edible to take effect. High-potency concentrates can cause stronger effects than expected.

Do not drive or operate machinery after using cannabis. It is not possible to judge driving safety only by whether you still feel high.

Keep cannabis in its original child-resistant packaging, locked away and out of sight. Edibles should be stored separately from ordinary food because they may look like sweets, baked goods, or drinks. Do not use food containers that could confuse children or visitors.

Cannabis use during pregnancy or breastfeeding may expose a developing baby to THC. Health authorities advise avoiding cannabis during these periods.

Living with it and what to expect

An isolated episode usually improves as the body processes THC. Inhaled cannabis often has a shorter course than edible cannabis, but timing is not predictable from the product alone. Strong products, large exposures, and edibles can cause effects lasting many hours.

Sleepiness, slowed thinking, anxiety, or reduced concentration may continue after the strongest effects have passed. Some people do not feel fully normal until after sleeping. Driving and other safety-sensitive tasks should wait until all impairment has resolved.

An uncomplicated intoxication episode does not usually become an ongoing condition. Persistent confusion, paranoia, hallucinations, vomiting, or problems with daily functioning are not part of routine recovery and should be assessed.

If intoxication happens repeatedly, it may help to look at the pattern of use and its effects on

work, school, relationships, sleep, mood, finances, and safety. Support is available for people who want to reduce or stop cannabis use. Treatment may include counselling, behavioural therapies, and help managing withdrawal or related mental health concerns.

When to get medical help

Call emergency services if someone has:

Place an unconscious but breathing person on their side if it is safe to do so. Do not give food or drink. Stay with them while waiting for help.

Contact a poison centre promptly if a child may have eaten or drunk a cannabis product, even if symptoms have not appeared. Also seek urgent advice for a pregnant person, an older or medically frail adult, or anyone who took an unknown amount or an unidentified product.

Routine medical follow-up is appropriate if anxiety, suspicious thoughts, poor concentration, or vomiting continues after the expected effects should have passed. Follow-up can also help if intoxication is happening repeatedly or cannabis use is becoming difficult to control.

- Trouble breathing, blue or grey lips, or very slow breathing
- A seizure, collapse, or inability to wake
- Chest pain, severe shortness of breath, or fainting
- Extreme agitation, violent behaviour, or immediate risk of self-harm
- New weakness, severe headache, or other possible stroke symptoms
- A serious injury or possible exposure to opioids or another unknown drug

Common questions

How long does marijuana intoxication last?

The strongest effects often last several hours, but the course depends on the product, amount, and route of use. Edibles usually begin later and may last much longer than inhaled cannabis. Sleepiness or reduced concentration can continue after the obvious high has faded.

Can you overdose on marijuana?

A person can take enough THC to develop severe intoxication, including panic, vomiting, marked confusion, psychosis, or reduced responsiveness. Death caused by THC alone appears uncommon, but injuries, heart symptoms, mixed-drug exposure, and severe effects in children can be dangerous.

How can I sober up faster?

There is no proven quick way to remove THC from the body. Time, a calm setting, and avoiding further substances are the main measures. Coffee, exercise, cold showers, and vomiting do not reliably reverse intoxication.

Can a drug test prove someone is currently high?

Not by itself. THC breakdown products can remain in urine long after impairment has ended. Test results must be interpreted alongside symptoms, timing, examination findings, and other information.

Why do cannabis edibles sometimes feel stronger?

Edibles are absorbed slowly and processed by the liver. Their delayed start can lead someone to take more before feeling the first dose. Their effects can also be stronger or longer-lasting than expected, especially when THC is unevenly distributed.

Is marijuana intoxication the same as cannabis poisoning?

The terms can overlap. "Intoxication" includes the temporary mental and physical effects of THC. "Poisoning" is often used when exposure causes concerning symptoms, involves a child, or requires advice from a poison centre or medical care.

Sources

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