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Evidence for the Risks and Consequences of Adolescent Cannabis Exposure

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- The majority of the clinical and preclinical data point to a strong correlation between adolescent cannabinoid exposure and persistent, adverse neuropsychiatric outcomes in adulthood.
- Based on the data in the current literature, a strong association is found between early, frequent, and heavy adolescent cannabis exposure and poor cognitive and psychiatric outcomes in adulthood, yet definite conclusions cannot yet be made as to whether cannabis use alone has a negative impact on the human adolescent brain.
- The data thus far suggest that cannabis is most likely a far less harmful recreational drug than tobacco or alcohol when used by adults, decades of epidemiological research continue to draw a connection between early-onset cannabis use and negative life outcomes in adulthood.
- Adults who began as adolescents frequently present with impairments in attention, memory, and visual processing, as well as decreased full-scale IQ and verbal.
- Taken together, these data suggest that those individuals who initiated cannabis use earlier in life performed more poorly in tests of executive function, or had to work harder at each task to perform at the same level as later-onset users.
- Another important association between cannabis exposure and mood sequelae in adolescence is the increased risk for suicidality.
- There is a well-documented, disproportionate prevalence of early-onset cannabis use among individuals living with a psychotic disorder.
- Taken together, it is apparent that adolescent cannabis use is associated with an increased prevalence of psychosis in predisposed individuals, and that among adults diagnosed with a psychotic disorder, having used cannabis as an adolescent is predictive of a poorer prognosis for their psychotic illness, including a greater risk for and more frequent psychotic relapses, poorer treatment adherence, and increased hospitalization.
- Among adults reporting illicit drug use, such as cocaine, methamphetamine, or heroin use, adolescent cannabis use overwhelmingly predates the use of and/or the later dependence on other illicit drugs, and the likelihood of future use and dependence increases the earlier an individual initiates cannabis use and the more they consume cannabis thereafter.
- When examining human trajectories of drug use, cannabis exposure almost unanimously precedes the use of other illicit drugs.
- Although by no means definite, current clinical and preclinical evidence demonstrates that exposure to cannabis in adolescence is associated with potential harmful cognitive and affective outcomes in adulthood.
- Regardless of cause or effect, youth who use cannabis are at higher risk for potential psychiatric morbidity and learning difficulties, as well as suicidality and addiction in adulthood.