



Legalization and Decriminalization of Marijuana

The effort to roll back the decades-long prohibitions on possession of marijuana are well underway, and it seems inevitable that all 50 states will eventually fully legalize or decriminalize marijuana to varying degrees. While decriminalization and legalization both take marijuana possession out of the criminal justice process, the two approaches are quite different.

Currently, North Carolina remains one of the more restrictive states when it comes to marijuana. Penalties remain in place for possession of any amount of marijuana and exceptions for medical use are limited. What happens to a person found in possession of marijuana depends on the amount. Less than half an ounce is a Class 3 misdemeanor, for example, while possession of over 1 ½ ounces is a Class I felony. (North Carolina is actually listed in many publications including Wikipedia as having decriminalized small amounts of marijuana possession in 1977. This would come as a surprise to the hundreds of people in Dare County alone who have appeared in criminal court for simple marijuana possession.)

There are a variety of approaches to decriminalization. In some states, this means the state has changed its laws to make possession of marijuana, up to certain amounts, no longer subject to prosecution. Individuals in possession of marijuana may still be subject to a fine, but they would essentially be tantamount to a traffic offense where a person does not face jail time or probation. As it applies to marijuana, this means a person caught with a small amount of marijuana won't be prosecuted and will not have a charge reflected on their criminal record. Decriminalization typically only applies to "personal use" amounts of marijuana. What constitutes "personal use" also varies from state to state. Possessing, selling or growing marijuana may still be a crime. And, just like cigarettes and alcohol, possession of marijuana by persons under 21 might also still be a crime.

Legalization is a simpler concept to understand since it simply means you can't be charged for using or possessing marijuana as long as you are following the state's law as to age, place and amount of consumption. Again, every state will vary in what they consider a legal amount of marijuana to possess: in New Jersey it is 6 ounces, in North Dakota it is ½ an ounce. Even in states that have legalized marijuana, there are usually restrictions and regulations governing the cultivation, distribution and sale of marijuana.

Unfortunately, what often gets lost in the discussion of decriminalization and legalization is the fact that, like alcohol and tobacco, marijuana has harmful effects and has a particularly strong impact on adolescents. This is exacerbated by the fact that the THC levels in marijuana (THC is the main psychoactive ingredient in marijuana) are steadily rising. Before 1990, THC levels in marijuana generally tested around 2%. This doubled over the next 10 years. The marijuana industry has developed strains of marijuana with much higher concentrations of THC, anywhere from 17-28%. Most researchers stress that, despite increasingly relaxed societal views toward the drug, marijuana use—especially in adolescence—is not benign.

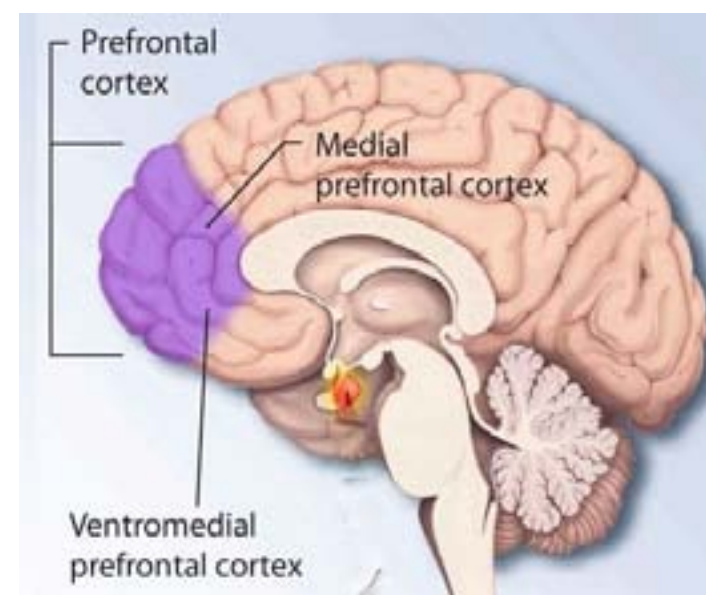
SAVING LIVES TASK FORCE

The Initiative is a quarterly newsletter presented by the Saving Lives Task Force, the goal of this publication is to educate, inform and engage residents of Dare County.

- **Our Task Force is** a team of professionals and community members working toward the prevention of substance use disorders and the availability of effective treatment for all Dare county citizens in need of help.
- **Join us for our Virtual Meetings** on the 3rd Tuesday of every month at 2:00 pm.
- **For More Information** please contact Roxana Ballinger, Saving Lives Task Force Co-Chair, at 252.475.5619 or roxana.ballinger@darenc.com.

savinglivesobx.com
facebook.com/savinglivesobx

The Impact of Marijuana on the Adolescent Brain



One of the last parts of the brain to develop is an area called the prefrontal cortex where the development is completed in later adolescence.

THE INITIATIVE Resources:

savinglivesobx.com

PORT/New Horizons
2808 S Croatan Hwy,
Nags Head, NC 27959
252.441.2324

Trillium Health Resources
www.trilliumncaccesspoint.org
877.685.2415 – 24 Hours a Day

Mobile Crisis Team
24 Hours a Day / 7 Days a Week
866.437.1821

2-1-1 Directory
www.nc211.org

Community Care Clinic of Dare
Syringe Services Program
M-Th | 9 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.
252.261.3041



SMART Recovery OBX Addiction Support Group

When: Mondays, 6-7pm for 60 minutes

Where: Nags Head Treatment Center, 2224 S. Croatan Hwy., Nags Head

Facilitators: Scott and Katy Haslar, smartrecoveryobx@gmail.com

Visit our homepage at <https://www.facebook.com/SMART-Recovery-OBX-102545492070416>

SMART Recovery (Self Management and Recovery Training) is a non-profit, science-backed program that helps people recover from addictive behaviors. It can be used as an alternative or in addition to 12-step programs (such as AA and NA). In SMART, we focus on the present and what you want for your future rather than the past. Being in recovery is individual - it means different things to different people, so in SMART, we encourage you to define what recovery is for yourself.

Alcoholics Anonymous: Meetings 7 days a week.

Visit the website AAOBX.com for current virtual meeting schedule

Outer Banks AA Hotline 252-256-0850

<https://aaoxb.com/>

Outer Banks Alateen, Outer Banks Alateen Meeting, Saturdays, 10-11am, Kitty Hawk Baptist Church, email alateen@alanonobx.com for information. Alateen is a fellowship of young people whose lives have been affected by alcoholism in a family member or friend.

OBX Nar-anon is a means of coping with the insanity brought about from having a family member or friend struggling with addiction. For more details, please contact Holly Henry West at 252-489-7778.

Recovery Learning Circle

A peer facilitated, virtual support, coping skills and recovery planning group for everyone. We will be learning awareness and coping skills for dealing with depression, anxiety, isolation, substance use, stress, emotions, interpersonal skills and mindfulness. We develop awareness of our own strengths and priorities, and learn from and support each other in recovery by building hope, empowerment, resilience, personal responsibility and support.

Call Dave Edmonds 252-305-4056 or David.Edmonds@darenc.com

Women of Worth

Groups are being held virtually on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 11:00am-12:00pm. The groups will focus on recovery from the evidence-based curriculum, "Helping Women Recover."

Please contact Catisha Bryant at catisha.bryant@darenc.com for more information or if you would like to join the group.

Annual Walk Against Addiction First Flight High School, Sept. 25, 2021

5K begins at 8am, walk event starts at 9:30-12. Lunch provided, Contact Brenda Thacker at 252-202-1110

Breaking Through Task Force, 2nd Tuesday of the month, 8:30 am

The Breaking Through Task Force is composed of community members who wish to address communication and stigma concerns about mental health conditions and substance use disorders.

Contact Rebecca.woods@darenc.com www.breakthestigmaobx.com

Dare Community Collaborative, 2nd Tuesday of the month, 1:30-2:30 pm

A partnership among providers and families of youth and adults with mental health issues and/or substance use issues. Together, they identify services, support needs and try to find ways to meet those needs.

Contact Keith Letchworth, keith.letchworth@trilliumnc.org

The Impact of Marijuana on the Adolescent Brain

Adolescence is a time when youth are working toward self-identity and independence. While these years can present joyful times, they can also present times of mood shifts, impulsivity and poor judgement. There are biological changes taking place that can explain some of the challenging, yet natural developmental behaviors we see. While referring to adolescence as the teen years is common, most recent studies agree adolescence actually takes place between the ages of 10-24. During this period, the brain is undergoing rapid development. Due to the significant development, the adolescent brain is particularly vulnerable to substances such as marijuana.

One of the last parts of the brain to develop is an area called the prefrontal cortex where the development is completed in later adolescence. One of the reasons we see some of the mood shifts, emotional dysregulation, impulsivity and poor judgement mentioned earlier is because the part of the brain controlling those elements has yet to mature. The prefrontal cortex is also known to be the part of the brain that enhances reasoning, planning and focus. Introducing marijuana to the developing prefrontal cortex may result in one engaging in higher risk-taking activities, increasing mood swings or a decreasing ability to control emotions and a decrease in school grades.

Through the University of Illinois in Chicago, neuroscientist Kuei Y. Tseng conducts studies on the effects of THC on the brains of rats in the adolescent period of development. His research has shown that rats introduced to THC in adolescence experienced delayed maturation of the prefrontal cortex. Tseng also found "[t]he disruption alters how the area processes information when the animals are adults (Shen, 2020)."

A study published in 2014 (Gruber et al.) found that regular use of marijuana, particularly before the age of 16, resulted in damage to the white matter in the brain. The white matter in the brain is the key to communication between the brain cells. When white matter is damaged, we can see delays in reaction, decision-making and focus.

An additional concern with youth marijuana use is the greater likelihood of addiction. The CDC reports that about 1 in 10 marijuana users will become addicted. For people who begin using before the age of 18, that number rises to 1 in 6. In other words, the evidence suggests that someone who begins using marijuana before the age of 18 has a 40% higher chance of continuing usage into adulthood.

We would be remiss if we did not address the youth e-cigarette epidemic in this article. The introduction of the sleek Juul device in 2015 introduced the world to a rechargeable nicotine delivery system that is easy to conceal due to its resemblance to a jump drive. The device was particularly attractive to youth due to its appearance and also through the successful marketing efforts of the Juul company that targeted youth.

Users of the Juul and other nicotine delivery devices soon discovered they can use the devices to vape marijuana. The 2019 Monitoring the Future Survey, which is a self-report study administered to 10th and 12th graders in the U.S. found that vaping of marijuana more than doubled in the past two years amongst 12th graders and nearly doubled for 10th graders.

Despite the multitude of research on adolescent marijuana use, more research is needed for conclusive evidence on the long-term effects. The National Institute on Drug Abuse is currently conducting the largest long-term study of brain development and child health called the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study. Over the next seven years, the study will be taking a deeper look into the impact of drugs on the developing brain. The study is certainly something we want to follow as we continue to evaluate marijuana's effect on our youth.

In any event, while research on long-term physiological effects is still being conducted, we know that youth marijuana use poses many other social and emotional risks, including difficulty in the classroom and impulsive decision-making. As a community, we must continue to work to prevent youth marijuana use.

Resources:

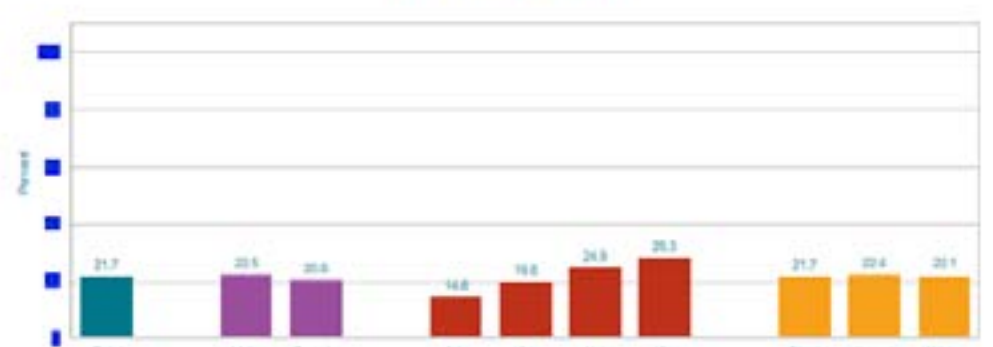
Gruber, S. A., Dahlgren, M. K., Sagar, K. A., Gönenç, A., & Lukas, S. E. (2014). Worth the wait: effects of age of onset of marijuana use on white matter and impulsivity. *Psychopharmacology*, 231(8), 1455-1465. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-013-3326-z>

Shen, Helen. (2020) Cannabis and the adolescent brain. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 117(1), 7-11. <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/117/1/7.full.pdf>

Percentage of High School Students Who Currently Used Marijuana*



Percentage of High School Students Who Currently Used Marijuana,* by Sex, Grade,¹ and Race/Ethnicity, 2019



¹Due to small sizes within the 10th class within the survey, 10th = 360, 11th = 380, 12th = 390, 13th = 400, 14th = 410. Based on trend analysis, p < 0.05. All Hispanic students are included in the Hispanic category. All other races are non-Hispanic. This graph contains weighted results.