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# Is Marijuana Addictive?

- **Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal drug**
- **Marijuana is criticized as having a high potential for abuse**
- **[Studies](#) estimate that 1 in 10 users will develop an addiction**
- **Marijuana addiction is defined according to DSM-IV guidelines**
- **Withdrawal and tolerance are 2 major symptoms of marijuana addiction**

Marijuana is the most widely used illegal substance in North America and worldwide. As research continues to confirm the relative safety of marijuana, it has become difficult for anyone to find fault with this drug. Nevertheless, the argument of its addictive potential remains.

In the US, marijuana is classified as a Schedule I substance, meaning that it must fulfill the requirement of having “a high potential for abuse”. But what exactly does this mean?

## What is Drug Abuse?



[Image source](#)

Drug (or substance) abuse is defined as a pattern of drug use that occurs in amounts or by methods that are neither approved nor supervised by medical professionals.

Based on this definition, it is easy to see why marijuana may be considered as having a high potential for abuse, simply due to the fact that most medical professionals are unwilling to recommend or support its use. However, reasons for this lack of support are still unclear.

Since studies continue to show that marijuana poses little to no risk of long-term side effects, many are led to believe that marijuana must be dangerously addictive. But once again, scientific evidence suggests the contrary.

## Addiction Potential

[Studies](#) estimate that only 1 in 10 individuals who try marijuana will ever become a regular user and display signs of dependence or addiction. Furthermore, health experts such as Dr. Jack E. Henningfield of the NIDA have [ranked marijuana](#) as the least addictive drug among substances such as caffeine, nicotine and alcohol.

Even still, marijuana addiction (also known as cannabis dependence) is a real medical condition that will affect a significant portion of users at some point in their lives.

## What is Cannabis Dependence?

Cannabis dependence is a clinical condition that is classified according to DSM-IV guidelines. The DSM-IV is used by doctors in the United States and provides a standard criteria for the classification of mental conditions.

According to the DSM-IV, cannabis dependence is defined as:

**A pattern of cannabis use that leads to 3 (or more) of the following symptoms:**

- 1. Tolerance**
- 2. Withdrawal**
- 3. The substance is often taken in larger amounts or over a longer period than was intended**
- 4. There is a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance use**
- 5. Large amounts of time are devoted to obtaining and using the substance and recovering from its effects**
- 6. Important social, occupational or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of substance use**
- 7. Continued use despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by the substance**

*Criteria adapted from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 2000 (DSM-IV-TR)*

## Tolerance and Withdrawal Symptoms

Some argue that marijuana differs from other substances in the sense that it is only ‘psychologically’ addictive – but this is not true.

While the psychological symptoms of addiction may be more prominent in cannabis users, studies show that cannabis dependence is accompanied by physical symptoms – such as tolerance and withdrawal – as well.

Tolerance occurs when increasing amounts of marijuana are necessary to achieve the desired effects. Tolerance is common among daily users and can be explained by the amount of time the body takes to metabolize cannabinoids such as [THC](#).

[Evidence](#) suggests that THC can remain in the body for a significant amount of time, even after its effects have worn off. Furthermore, THC levels can build up in regular users and have been [detected](#) in blood samples taken after a month of no intake. When traces of THC are stored in the body over time, larger quantities of marijuana are necessary for users to achieve their desired ‘high’.

Withdrawal is another physical symptom of addiction that occurs when marijuana use is stopped after a period of regular use. [Studies](#) show that marijuana users are prone to a specific set of withdrawal symptoms, which include anxiety, irritability, physical tension, and decreases in mood. Once again, withdrawal is due to the build up of cannabinoid levels that occurs during regular use.

[Research](#) has found that withdrawal symptoms are most noticeable during the first 10 days of abstinence, but may be present for up to 28 days in some users. Overall, the symptoms and severity of withdrawal are expected to vary from user to user.

