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## Health

### Health Journal: More people seek help for marijuana addiction

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By Kevin Helliker, The Wall Street Journal

People are aware of the addictive potential of alcohol, cocaine, heroin, even gambling. But the perception persists that marijuana isn't addictive.

The doggedness of this myth may be attributable to the campaign to legalize the drug, as well as the comparatively subtle costs of marijuana addiction. But there is virtually no debate among American researchers, who have been documenting and studying marijuana addiction for more than two decades. Now, Cambridge University Press has combined the results of their federally funded studies -- most already published in peer-reviewed journals -- in a new book called "Cannabis Dependence."

The book offers substantial scientific evidence of what Marijuana Anonymous members know firsthand -- that the euphoria induced by THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, can be addictive. Studies show that between 2 percent and 3 percent of U.S. marijuana users become addicted within two years of first trying the drug, which is scientifically known as cannabis. About 10 percent of those who try it become addicted at some point.

Now, addiction-treatment statistics are showing dramatic growth in marijuana-related problems. A study issued last month by the University of Maryland's Center for Substance Abuse Research examined the drug of choice for Americans seeking treatment for addiction during the decade that ended in 2003. It found that the percentage of addicts who cited marijuana as their primary problem more than doubled to 16 percent from 7 percent, while alcohol fell to 41 percent from 57 percent. Among illegal drugs, only opiates ranked higher than marijuana as a problem for treatment seekers.

Marijuana's rise in the ranks of problem drugs may reflect a big spike in usage. The number of Americans age 12 and older using marijuana at least once a month jumped to 14.6 million in 2004 from 10.1 million in 1996, according to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which adds that some of that jump may be attributable to a change in surveying methods.

To study marijuana addiction, the contributors to "Cannabis Dependence" -- a group of researchers at universities across the U.S. -- published newspaper advertisements offering treatment to people unable

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to quit using the drug. Invariably, hundreds stepped forward. The typical volunteer was a white-collar man in his thirties who smoked marijuana daily and didn't much abuse alcohol or other drugs. "Their substance of choice is marijuana," says Roger A. Roffman, an editor of "Cannabis Dependence" and a University of Washington professor of social work.

The researchers found that the overall rate of addiction among marijuana users is slightly lower than for imbibers of alcohol. But among people who use marijuana daily, the rate of addiction is significantly higher than among daily drinkers. Addiction is diagnosed when a person experiences at least three of seven indicators, such as failure to control usage, preoccupation with the drug and withdrawal symptoms.

The addictiveness of marijuana is underappreciated in part because legalization advocates tend to play down the problem. But a bigger factor may be that marijuana addiction typically doesn't kill, wreck careers, ruin health or otherwise wreak the sort of tragedies that make headlines. Although studies suggest that marijuana can cause neurological and cardiovascular damage, that evidence remains inconclusive and largely connected to smoking the drug, which isn't necessary. Marijuana-enriched olive oil can deliver a powerful high.

Yet if marijuana addiction were benign, thousands of Americans wouldn't be seeking to kick the habit each year. In treatment, many express a sense of being unable to move forward in their personal and professional lives while in a constant state of marijuana intoxication. Often, marijuana addiction damages relationships. Its illegality can get a user arrested.

Then there are the symptoms of withdrawal: "irritability, anger, nervousness, sleep difficulty, change in appetite, physical discomfort," says Alan J. Budney, a University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences addiction specialist.

The typical absence of dramatic consequences can make marijuana addiction difficult to break. The memory of brushes with death, jail and destitution can help keep a heroin user or alcoholic from relapsing. But the more-subtle costs of marijuana addiction are easier to forget. Research shows that staying clean is just as hard for marijuana addicts as for heroin addicts, says Robert S. Stephens, chairman of psychology at Virginia Tech University and "Cannabis Dependence" editor.

Initially, meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous provided little help to a Chicago marijuana addict named Bob, who asked that his last name not be used for this article. "I would hear people talk about liver damage, job losses, broken marriages -- stuff that had never happened to me," says Bob, a white-collar worker in his late 20s at that time.

On the surface, his life appeared to be well-managed. He was pursuing a college degree at night and competing in triathlons on weekends. But his sense of accomplishment was utterly undermined by his incessant need to sneak off and smoke joints. He even bought a car expressly for the purpose of having a private place to get high on his lunch hour in downtown Chicago. For an entire decade, he got high about four times a day.

Ultimately, he came to realize he was no less an addict than is the

alcoholic or the heroin user. His last toke came in November of 1998. Soon afterward he started a Chicago meeting of Marijuana Anonymous.

After seven clean years, he says, he still has cravings: "I'll catch a whiff of pot on the street, and my mouth starts watering."

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