

# RECREATIONAL CANNABIS USE AND THE UNKNOWNNS

ONE THING IS FOR SURE, SAYS DR. NADIA ALAM, 'THERE ARE RISKS'



NADIA ALAM  
Column

Fifty-six per cent of Ontarians said they would not tell their doctor that they are using recreational marijuana, and that's a problem. Marijuana won't hurt everyone, but it isn't safe for everyone either.

Recreational cannabis - also known as weed, pot, marijuana, MJ, etc - is not the same as medical cannabis. Both come from the sativa plant. But medical cannabis is not intoxicating and is prescribed in cancer treatment, epilepsy, chronic pain and other illnesses.

Recreational cannabis is a whole other ballgame.

Legalization of marijuana on Oct. 17 will increase access. Increased access means increased utilization. Overall, decriminalization and harm reduction policies create healthier, safer communities. People need to know the pros and cons to make healthy decisions.

Recreational cannabis changes the human brain. It slows down reaction time, judgement, concentration, memory and decision-making - skills used every day in school, driving, cooking and work.

On average, people start using marijuana at age 17. The human brain grows and develops right up until age 25. So even though the government has made recreational cannabis legal at age 19,

it's not safe for youth. In fact, teens who use recreational cannabis are at increased risk for mental illnesses like anxiety or even schizophrenia.

One in six teens become addicted to marijuana. Quitting cold-turkey can be associated with withdrawal symptoms like anger, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, decreased appetite and weight loss.

Smoking marijuana can hurt your lungs, increasing the risk for COPD, asthma, and lung cancer. Second-hand smoke can be harmful, especially to children and pets.

Emergency room doctors are seeing more and more patients come in with severe stomach pain, vomiting, and weight loss that gets better with a hot shower. These are symptoms of Cannabinoid Hyperemesis Syndrome and they mimic other life-and-death emergencies. So doctors end up running tests to sort out the diagnosis, only to realize in the end that the symptoms are caused by regular use of one or more grams of recreational marijuana per day. The cure? Quitting.

And like any other sedative, recreational cannabis interacts with prescription and non-prescription drugs. I see it in the OR when I put people to sleep for surgery.

There's a lot we don't know yet about recreational cannabis. But what we do know is that there are risks. People need facts so they know when they're OK and when they need medical help. That's why we need to talk.

*Nadia Alam is a Georgetown physician and president of the Ontario Medical Association. She can be reached at [nadia.alam@oma.org](mailto:nadia.alam@oma.org).*

## THE WAY WE WERE



EHS photo Dorothy (Watson) McLean and her brother Robert McIntyre "Mac" pose on the sidewalk in front of their home in Norval in this photo dating back to 1915. The property at 511 Guelph St. was owned by their family and housed Watson's Bakery and Watson's Groceries, both significant businesses in the history of Norval. Representative of a Gothic Revival style commercial building that has been altered, 511 Guelph St. still stands today and is a listed cultural heritage property. Submitted by of Heritage Halton Hills

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