

Cannabis isn't the innocent recreational substance some say

Marijuana or pot, hashish and hash-oil are all derivatives of the common hemp plant, whose botanical name is Cannabis Sativa. The leaves, especially of the female plant, when dried can be smoked in home-rolled cigarettes. The resin exuded by the flowering head of the same female plant provides hashish which, when concentrated becomes hash-oil.

These latter products can be smoked alone or mixed with tobacco, cooked into food or used in a variety of other ways. The strength of all forms of this drug depends on where and at what time of the year the plants are grown.

Marijuana is not a new drug by any means. There are written references to its existence and use dating back as far as 2737 B.C. At that time, Emperor Shen Nung of China described marijuana as a medicine for "female weakness, gout, rheumatism, malaria, beri-beri, and absentmindedness".

Because this drug was known and in common use in India as early as 800 B.C., it acquired the name Indian Hemp by which it was known for centuries. Oddly enough the male plant is not only harmless but useful: it provides a fiber used for making rope. Only the female plant produces the psychoactive drug. George Washington grew hemp for its fiber: he is said to have expressed the wish that he could get away from government duties for the September hemp harvest.

During the early year of World War 2 when our principal sources of hemp in the Philippines were cut off by the Japanese, Cannabis was planted in Southern Ontario to produce fiber for the war-effort. The development of synthetic fibers made this source obsolete.

There was little concern over marijuana use in North America until about 1930. It was probably introduced into the Southwestern States from Mexico.

It was mainly used by Mexican Americans as a cheap way of relaxing and becoming high. Jazz musicians of the New Orleans area adopted it as their drug of recreation and, as they thought, inspiration. The drug was available legally through pharmacies as late as 1937 when it became outlawed by the Marijuana Tax Act (US).

This legislation imposed severe penalties for possession of even small quantities. Around the same time marijuana in any form was proscribed by the Narcotic Control Act of the Federal Government. Not only were severe penalties attached to possession or trafficking, but convicted offenders acquired a criminal

record.

Marijuana, hashish and hash-oil contain a group of chemicals called cannabinoids. The most active and damaging of these is commonly called THC - tetrahydrocannabinol.

Marijuana contains about 5 per cent of this substance, hashish up to 12 per cent and hash-oil as much as 60 per cent. An unusual aspect of the psychoactive THC component is that when broken down in the liver, one of the by-products of that breakdown, 10-hydroxy THC, is itself also psychoactive. This intensifies the mind-altering action of Cannabis.

What does Cannabis do for the user? An early report from a

reputable researcher in a large American College describes the physical action of Cannabis as causing excitation and depression, a slight increased appetite for sweets. These effects occur a few minutes after use and last from three to five hours.

Mentally it produces a dreamy condition: ideas come rapidly but are disjointed and uncontrollable. The user experiences a feeling of well-being, the excitement of being "high". In the down mood, there may be fear of death, even panic. Time passes slowly, distance and sound may be magnified. Space may seem stretched out. Reflexes are slowed as is conscious response

to stimuli. With heavy, steady usage, the depression which results may lead to suicide attempts. The conclusion of this study was that Cannabis use had been scientifically established as dangerous to body, mind and spirit.

The increasing popularity of Cannabis use in Canada has made it important to assess in a more precise yet scientific manner the effect of the use of this drug on health, both physical and mental.

While a great deal of information on the

harmful aspects of Cannabis use is available from the Near, Middle and Far East, relatively little research had been done in North America until the last twenty years. Such research is a long and complex process: it will take many years before we can establish in a scientific manner how Cannabis is harmful and to what extent.

However, long before we have statistical proof, we do have increasingly strong evidence that Cannabis is not the innocent recreational substance

many claim it to be. At present, our best source of information, aside from the limited research data available, is from individual case

reports of physicians who deal with users, or even small groups of users who have experienced damage as a result of Cannabis use.

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