



Cannabis Legalization and its Impact on Patterns of Use, Abuse, and Addiction: A Global Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

The global landscape of cannabis use has undergone significant changes in recent years, driven by a wave of legalization for medical and recreational purposes. Countries like Canada, Uruguay, and parts of the United States have led the charge, sparking debates on the social, medical, and economic implications of cannabis legalization. While proponents highlight benefits such as reduced criminalization and increased tax revenues, critics raise concerns about its impact on public health, particularly patterns of use, abuse, and addiction. This article provides a global perspective on cannabis legalization and its consequences. Cannabis remains the most widely used illicit drug globally, but legalization has shifted its status in many regions. Canada legalized recreational cannabis in 2018, becoming the first G7 nation to do so. In the United States, over 20 states have legalized recreational cannabis, while medical use is permitted in most states. Studies in Canada and the U.S. have shown that cannabis use has increased among adults post-legalization. Accessibility, reduced stigma, and commercialization contribute to this rise. While legalization often includes safeguards to restrict underage access, studies suggest mixed results. In some regions, adolescent use has remained stable, while in others, there is evidence of slight increases due to greater availability.

DESCRIPTION

Legalization has expanded the range of cannabis products, including edibles, oils, and concentrates. Potent products with high tetrahydrocannabinol levels are now widely available, raising concerns about stronger psychoactive effects. Legalization has led to a decline in the perceived risk of cannabis use, especially among younger populations. The normalization of cannabis could encourage experimentation and recreational use. Cannabis Use Disorder (CUD), characterized by dependency and problematic use, is a growing concern in legalized markets.

Data from legalized regions suggest a higher incidence of CUD, particularly among individuals using high-potency products. THC levels in legal markets often far exceed those in illicit cannabis, increasing the risk of dependency. Regular cannabis use has been linked to an increased risk of psychiatric disorders, including anxiety, depression, and psychosis. Individuals with genetic vulnerabilities or pre-existing mental health conditions may be at greater risk. Legalization may disproportionately affect marginalized communities, who may already struggle with substance abuse and limited access to healthcare. Legalization has reduced cannabis-related arrests and incarcerations, alleviating the burden on criminal justice systems.

CONCLUSION

Strategies to minimize adolescent exposure, such as restricting advertising, enforcing age limits, and educating youth on risks, are crucial. Regulatory measures to limit THC content and promote less potent products can help reduce dependency risks and adverse mental health outcomes. Legalization provides a unique opportunity to study cannabis use and its effects. Long-term, evidence-based research is critical to inform policies and address unintended consequences. Cannabis legalization has transformed patterns of use, abuse, and addiction on a global scale. While it offers benefits such as reduced criminalization and increased economic gains, it also raises concerns about increased cannabis use, dependency, and mental health impacts.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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