

Addressing Cannabis Use

Why is This Important?

Did you know that [more than one third of college students report using cannabis in the past year](#)?¹

A lot of conflicting and confusing information exists today about cannabis or marijuana[†] which is also known by many other names.[‡] The public health and legal environments are rapidly changing and it is hard to keep up with the most current research, laws, and recommendations.

For an in-depth discussion about many aspects of cannabis use, please [review the cannabis page from the NIH](#) and/or [read this podcast transcript with Dr. Wilson Compton](#).

Our goal is to give you science-based information and tips you can use to have important conversations with your college student.

What should I know?

How does the potency of today's cannabis compare to that of the past?

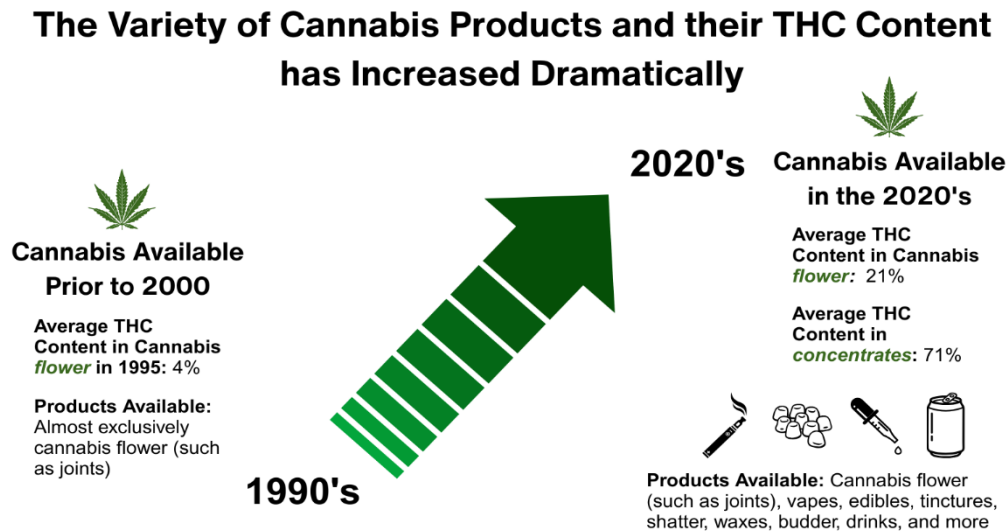
Today's typical cannabis is a lot more potent and most likely carries greater risk than what was used in past generations.

The strength of cannabis is measured by the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) concentration. THC is the component in cannabis that gives someone the "high" feeling. The higher the THC concentration, the stronger the cannabis. Both the variety of cannabis products (smokable flower, edibles, vapes, tinctures, etc.) and THC levels have increased significantly in recent years.^{2,3} Studies of DEA-seized cannabis find that on average, the THC content today is about 5 times more potent than in previous decades. However, this does not include even higher potency cannabis products frequently found in dispensaries in states that have legalized the sale of cannabis. In dispensaries, cannabis flower is on average 21% THC, with other concentrated products (such as waves, "shatter", and "budder") averaging 71% THC.⁴ This means that the average cannabis concentrate is 18 times stronger than what was available prior to 2000. Any product containing more than 10% THC is considered "high potency" and carries greater risk. Higher potency can mean more acute reactions to the drug, a faster transition to addiction, and eventually worse health outcomes.³

Cannabis that is available to consumers, even "medicinal" marijuana, is not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration,⁵ and the labeling of cannabis products is often inconsistent. Recent studies^{4,6} of the actual THC content in cannabis flower available in dispensaries find that up to 70% of what is sold is mislabeled (some products contained more or less THC than what was listed). Additionally, in a survey conducted by the Maryland Collaborative, more than two

thirds of students who reported using cannabis did not know the usual THC content of the products they used.⁷

The bottom line is that potency has increased. Because of this increased potency, many scientists believe cannabis used today carries a greater risk than the cannabis used in previous years. Levels of CBD (cannabidiol), the non-psychoactive component of cannabis (i.e., it does not produce a "high" feeling), have remained mostly the same.^{2,3}



Is cannabis addictive?

Cannabis is addictive and those who start early and/or use regularly have an increased risk of cannabis use disorder.

It is possible to become addicted to cannabis. "Cannabis use disorder" is the term that health professionals use to describe the problems that people experience as a result of using cannabis. The criteria for this disorder are the same as those for other substance use disorders. Almost one third of all persons who used marijuana in the past year developed a cannabis use disorder.⁸ The risk of becoming addicted to marijuana increases when a person starts using at an earlier age, uses more often, uses higher amounts, or uses stronger marijuana.⁹ If you're interested in learning more about this disorder and how many people develop this disorder, please see the Resources section.

One major sign of cannabis use disorder is continued use despite negative consequences. Individuals with this disorder also spend a lot of time preoccupied with getting the drug, using the drug, or getting over the effects of the drug. Why does this happen? From scientific research studies, we know that the path to addiction is more than a problem with willpower. Over-use of a psychoactive substance changes the brain and can make it harder to experience the happiness that results from other rewarding experiences, like eating good food, exercising, spending time with family and friends, doing well in school, and simple things like watching a good movie. The positive feelings from these natural rewards are drained as drug use begins to be prioritized.

The drug later becomes the main source of pleasure once the natural reward system is worn down.¹⁰ This can happen with cannabis use.

A step in the right direction is making efforts to stop using or even cut down how often the drug is used, with the intention of eventually stopping altogether. Sometimes when a person tries to stop or cut down cannabis use, they experience withdrawal and become irritable or nervous. A person who tries to cut down or quit might also have trouble sleeping, feel anxious, or have a decreased appetite. A longer duration and higher frequency of cannabis use often results in more severe withdrawal symptoms. If a person is dependent on cannabis, their withdrawal symptoms are typically more intense. Experiencing these withdrawal symptoms can frustrate a person and increase their desire to continue to use. Eventually, these symptoms will subside with continued abstinence, but sometimes a person will need help to quit altogether.¹¹

Signs your student might be experiencing cannabis withdrawal

- Increased feelings of nervousness
- Nausea
- Decreased hunger
- Difficulty sleeping
- Irritability
- Increased feelings of sadness and hopelessness

What impact does cannabis have on academics?

Cannabis use can negatively impact academic performance and can have adverse consequences for personal and professional success in later adulthood.

Regular cannabis use can negatively affect the parts of the brain involved in learning and memory, which are important for doing well in school and at work. This is especially true during college where students must learn a large amount of information in a short time. Cannabis use can also reduce a person's ability to concentrate and pay attention.

Using any kind of psychoactive substance, including cannabis, provides an immediate, but short-lived, pleasurable sensation. Regular use can reinforce this immediate reward.¹² As cannabis use becomes more and more regular, other activities and interests, and relationships that were once rewarding, can lose their value. A person becomes mainly focused on the immediate reward of getting and using the drug. Academic pursuits in college are challenging, require sustained focus, but carry long-term rewards. After a while, the immediate gratification from drug use can overtake one's academic motivation, leading to a loss of interest in school, and becoming disengaged.¹³

The end result is that cannabis use can reduce students' ability to complete assignments and projects. Research studies have linked marijuana use to skipping class during college and frequent marijuana users are more likely to have lower grade point averages than their classmates who do not use marijuana.^{14,15} In the long term, people who continue their regular cannabis use into later adulthood might decrease their chances of graduating, getting a good job and earning a decent salary.

What impact does cannabis have on mental health?

Cannabis use worsen and/or raise the risk of mental health problems.

Regular cannabis use can contribute to the onset of mental health problems or worsen the symptoms of existing mental health disorders. It can increase the number of negative thoughts felt by those with anxiety and depression. It can also increase the risk of developing psychosis, depression, or suicidal thoughts.^{16,17}

One common reason why young people report using cannabis is for relief from stress or feelings of anxiety. Feeling stress is a natural human response. It can help people stay motivated and solve problems in their daily lives. However, when there are too many stressors in a person's life or an event is particularly stressful, a person can feel overwhelmed. Using any psychoactive substance (including drinking alcohol or using cannabis) is not a healthy way to relieve stress. These substances only numb a person's uncomfortable feelings rather than help them manage them in a healthy way. Learning healthy ways to cope with stress and negative emotions as opposed to using cannabis can be very beneficial for young people and can help them practice skills to successfully meet the demands of adult responsibilities.

Healthy coping strategies are those that focus on reducing stress by addressing the stressors rather than avoiding them. For example, reaching out to others for support rather than withdrawing from friends would be a healthy coping strategy. Similarly, reframing a problem and identifying the potential positives would be a healthy coping strategy. In contrast, engaging in wishful thinking and hoping for a miracle to solve a problem rather than active problem solving would be an unhealthy coping strategy. Focusing on self-criticism and blaming oneself for the situation is another example of an unhealthy coping strategy. Additionally, getting enough sleep and exercise, and eating healthy foods are always important for providing the body with strength for coping with stressors.

As a parent, what should I do?

The guidance that might be most useful for you differs by your student's level of involvement with cannabis.

How would you describe your grown student's cannabis use?

I'm not sure if my student is using cannabis

Starting the conversation

- Start from a place of care and concern.

Tools and scripts to improve communication with your college student

- Ask for permission to talk about it.
- Ask about possible opportunities to use cannabis (friends, situations, etc....).
- Set clear expectations around cannabis use and tell your student that your expectations and disapproval are the same for cannabis as they are for all other drugs.

Say something like this...

"I'm worried about what goes on out there and I care about you. It would mean a lot to me if we could talk about this. Is that okay with you?"

"I want to be clear that I disapprove of cannabis use. I don't want you to become distracted by something that will take you away from what you want to achieve - in school, in your life and in your personal relationships with other people."

Focus on the positives

- Emphasize how important your student's health is to you, your family, and their friends.
- Discuss your student's natural gifts, accomplishments and how cannabis use might halt their progress, and be a barrier to success during college.

Offer your student support

- Offer a line of communication for when your student is feeling sad or distressed.
- Discuss healthy behaviors that help to alleviate the stressors of young adulthood. Healthy behaviors might include exercise, using social supports, talking about their stressors, relaxation techniques, seeking professional help...

Say something like this...

"I am proud of what you have accomplished in life so far. You are important to us and I want you to make the most of your twenties. However, with added responsibilities, young adulthood can get extremely stressful. I would like to talk to you about how to deal with stress and your emotions in a healthy way. I want you to be able to handle whatever comes your way. Let's work together to find ways that work best for you."

- Discuss potential risky situations and brainstorm effective strategies for how to respond.

Say something like this...

"I want to make sure you feel prepared in any situation. [Brainstorm risky situations that could come up.] Let's talk about what you can say or do if you find yourself in one of these situations."

Be a reliable source of information for your student and correct misinformation

- Discuss any family history of mental illness and addiction. Even without a family history, cannabis can increase the risk of developing a mental illness or worsen mental health problems.

Say something like this...

"If you don't know, your relative struggled with alcohol use and it affected him, as well as the family, in this way. We might also be prone to an increased risk of..."

"Because we have family members who have had problems with addiction, we might have more risk than other people for developing an addiction/ it might be riskier for us than other people who don't have a family history of addiction./ I want you to have this information when you are making your decisions./so you can make informed choices-decisions"

"I don't know about all of our family members – some of them might have struggled with this stuff and we might never know."

- Talk about how there is a lot of misinformation on the internet and social media about cannabis.
- Emphasize the negative impacts of using cannabis that they might not have thought about (e.g., overdose vs. potentially serious impacts on academic success and personal achievement).

Say something like this...

"I know there is a lot of misinformation on the internet about marijuana being a stress reliever and you might meet people who use marijuana to relax. However, using cannabis is not a healthy way to relieve stress."

"Cannabis is much stronger than it was when I was your age. Research shows that with this stronger cannabis people can become addicted and addicted faster and that it can be unhealthy for the brain, especially for people who might already feel anxious or sad."

"Eventually, this can cause people to lose interest in things that they really like to do. People may not even realize that they are spending a lot of time focused on their cannabis use."

My student uses cannabis, but I'm not sure how much or how often

Starting the conversation

- Remain calm and resist temptation to blame.
- Restate your expectations related to disapproval of cannabis use and all drugs.

Say something like this...

"I want you to know that I am aware that you are using cannabis and I want to be clear that I disapprove of cannabis use. I just don't want you to become distracted by something that will

take you away from what you want to achieve – in school, in your life and in your personal relationships with other people.”

Focus on the positives

- Emphasize how important your student's health is to you, your family, and their friends.
- Discuss your student's natural gifts, accomplishments and how cannabis use might halt their progress, and be a barrier to success during college.

Offer your student support

- Offer a line of communication for when your student is feeling sad or distressed.
- Discuss healthy behaviors that help to alleviate the stressors of young adulthood. Healthy behaviors might include exercise, using social supports, talking about their stressors, relaxation techniques, seeking professional help...

Say something like this...

"I am proud of what you have accomplished in life so far. You are important to us and I want you to make the most of your twenties. However, the responsibilities of young adulthood can get extremely stressful. I would like to talk to you about how to deal with stress and your emotions in a healthy way. I want you to be able to handle whatever comes your way. Let's work together to find ways that work best for you."

"Young adulthood can be a stressful time. I'm hearing you like to use cannabis because it helps you to calm down when you're stressed out. I want you to know that cannabis only provides short-term relief. It does not solve what might be actually causing your problems. However, we could discuss some healthier ways to cope with those stressful situations."

- Discuss potential risky situations and brainstorm effective strategies for how to respond.

Say something like this...

"I want to make sure you feel prepared in any situation. [Brainstorm risky situations that have or could come up.] Let's talk about what you can say or do to avoid or remove yourself from these situations."

Be a reliable source of information for your student and correct misinformation

- Discuss any family history of mental illness and addiction. Even without a family history, cannabis can increase the risk of developing a mental illness or worsen mental health problems.

Say something like this...

"If you don't know, your relative struggled with alcohol use and it affected him, as well as the family, in this way. We might also be prone to an increased risk of..."

"Because we have family members who have had problems with addiction, we might have more risk than other people for developing an addiction/it might be riskier for us than other people who don't have a family history of addiction./ I want you to have this information when you are making your decisions./so you can make informed choices-decisions."

"I don't know about all of our family members – some of them might have struggled with this stuff and we might never know."

- Talk about how there is a lot of misinformation on the internet and social media about cannabis.
- Emphasize the negative impacts of using cannabis that they might not have thought about (e.g., overdose vs. potentially serious impacts on academic success and personal achievement).
- Emphasize that your student might never know the THC or CBD concentration or what else their cannabis products contain because the FDA does not regulate any sold products.
- State that the potency of cannabis might differ from product to product.
- Be sure to include how frequent use can increase the risk of developing a substance use disorder, worsen mental health outcomes, and impact their academic achievement.

Say something like this...

"I know there is a lot of misinformation on the internet about marijuana being a stress reliever and you might meet people who use marijuana to relax. However, using cannabis is not a healthy way to relieve stress."

"Cannabis is much stronger than it was when I was your age. Research shows that with this stronger cannabis people can become addicted and addicted faster and it can be unhealthy for the brain, especially for people who might already feel anxious or sad."

"Eventually, this can cause people to lose interest in things that they really like to do. People may not even realize that they are spending a lot of time focused on their cannabis use."

In a supportive, non-judgmental way gather information about their use patterns

- Ask how frequently your student is using cannabis and under what circumstances.

Say something like this...

"Can you tell me how often and in what situations you use cannabis? How regularly?"

- Acknowledge stressors and attempt to redirect student to use healthy stress management tools instead of cannabis use.

Offer a challenge¹⁸

- Challenge your student to quit using cannabis for a brief period and see how it goes.
 - If they are able to stop using: Ask if/how life differed from before and discuss the pros and cons of using cannabis based on this experience.
 - If they are unable to stop using: Ask about what got in the way of stopping completely. Ask what types of situations/events trigger their desire to use. Discuss some solutions for how they could try again.
 - If they are unwilling to try to stop using: Ask about motivations for continued use. Ask them to discuss the pros and cons of use.

Say something like this...

"I do not want your cannabis use to start impacting your health or other responsibilities in your life. I am here to help you. I want to challenge you to quit using cannabis for x number of days/weeks."

Seek treatment

- If you are worried about your student's safety, seek treatment from professional resources.

My student uses cannabis regularly

Starting the conversation

- Ask about possible opportunities to use cannabis (friends, situations, etc...).
- Set clear expectations around cannabis use and tell your student that your expectations and disapproval are the same for cannabis as they are for all other drugs.

Say something like this...

"I want to be clear that I disapprove of cannabis use. I just don't want you to become distracted by something that will take you away from what you want to achieve – in school, in your life and in your personal relationships with other people."

Focus on the positives

- Don't blame yourself. You are not alone in your situation and it's important for you to seek support for yourself as well.
- Emphasize how important your student's health is to you, your family, and their friends.
- Discuss your student's natural gifts, accomplishments and how cannabis use might halt their progress, and be a barrier to success during college.

Offer your student support

- Offer a line of communication for when your student is feeling sad or distressed.
- Discuss healthy behaviors that help to alleviate the stressors of young adulthood. Healthy behaviors might include exercise, using social supports, talking about their stressors, relaxation techniques, seeking professional help...

Say something like this...

"I am proud of what you have accomplished in life so far. You are important to us and I want you to make the most of your twenties. However, with added responsibilities, young adulthood can get extremely stressful. I would like you to talk to you about how to deal with stress and your emotions in a healthy way. I want you to be able to handle whatever comes your way. Let's work together to find ways that work best for you."

"Young adulthood can be a stressful time. I'm hearing you like to use cannabis because it helps you to calm down when you're stressed out. I want you to know that cannabis only provides short-term relief. It does not solve what might be actually causing your problems. However, we could discuss some healthier ways to cope with those stressful situations."

"I want to take this opportunity to discuss how I am worried about you. Your cannabis use has become a problem. I am concerned that it is negatively impacting your mental health, your academic achievement, and how you go about your daily life. I have also noticed that you do not seem as happy as you once were. I have also noticed that you are continuing to use cannabis regardless of the negative consequences it is causing. I don't want you to feel isolated or helpless."

- Discuss potential risky situations and brainstorm effective strategies for how to respond.

Say something like this...

"I want to make sure you feel prepared in any situation. [Brainstorm risky situations that have or could come up.] Let's talk about what you can say or do to avoid or remove yourself from these situations."

Be a reliable source of information for your student and correct misinformation

- Discuss any family history of mental illness and addiction. Even without a family history, cannabis can increase the risk of developing a mental illness or worsen mental health problems.

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"I don't know about all of our family members – some of them might have struggled with this stuff and we might never know."

- Talk about how there is a lot of misinformation on the internet and social media about cannabis.
- Emphasize that there are several factors that influence the risk of developing a substance use disorder. These factors include early initiation of use, the strength of the drug, the frequency of use, and certain genetic predispositions.
- Emphasize the negative impacts of using cannabis that they might not have thought about (e.g., overdose vs. potentially serious impacts on academic success and personal achievement).

Say something like this...

"I know there is a lot of misinformation on the internet about marijuana being a stress reliever and you might meet people who use marijuana to relax. However, using cannabis is not a healthy way to relieve stress."

"Cannabis is much stronger than it was when I was your age. Research shows that with this stronger cannabis people can become addicted and addicted faster and that it can be unhealthy for the brain, especially for people who might already feel anxious or sad."

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Offer a challenge¹⁸

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 - If they are able to stop using: Ask if/how life differed from before and discuss the pros and cons of using cannabis based on this experience.
 - If they are unable to stop using: Ask about what got in the way of stopping completely. Ask what types of situations/events trigger their desire to use. Discuss some solutions for how they could try again. Most of all, consider seeking outside help (e.g. treatment, counseling) as not being able to quit can be a symptom of cannabis use disorder.
 - If they are unwilling to try to stop using: Ask about motivations for continued use. Ask them to discuss the pros and cons of use. Consider seeking outside help (e.g. treatment, counseling).

Say something like this...

“I do not want your cannabis use to start impacting your health or other responsibilities in your life. I am here to help you. I want to challenge you to quit using cannabis for x number of days/weeks.”

Encouraging and facilitating treatment seeking.

- Know that treatment for cannabis use disorder can be a long process and that change usually is not immediate.
- Discuss how the apathy associated with cannabis use can influence the desire to seek treatment.

Say something like this...

“You might feel like treatment for your cannabis use is unnecessary. It might be possible for some people to stop using cannabis on their own. However, there are people that can help you. I would like you to talk to these people to find out what help you need so that you can stop using cannabis. I will help and support you in any way I can through the process.”

Want to know more?

General Resources

- [Adolescent Brain Development and Drugs](#)
- [Counseling Parents and Teens about Marijuana Use in the Era of Legalization of Marijuana](#)
- [FDA Regulation of Cannabis and Cannabis-Derived Products, Including Cannabinol \(CBD\)](#)
- [Partnership to End Addiction](#)
- [U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory: Marijuana Use and the Developing Brain](#)
- [Considerations when Attending College in a State with Legal Adult Use Cannabis: Maryland as an Example](#)

Cannabis Use Disorder

Criteria for Cannabis Use Disorder

- Diagnostic criteria for Cannabis Use Disorder (CUD), as well as Cannabis Withdrawal, are defined by the American Psychiatric Association.¹⁹
- **Severity:** 2-3 symptoms=Mild, 4-5 symptoms=Moderate, 7+ symptoms=Severe

Diagnostic Criteria: Cannabis Use Disorder

- A. A Problematic pattern of cannabis use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by at least two of the following, occurring within a 12-month period:
 1. Often take in larger amounts or over a longer period than was intended.
 2. A persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control use.
 3. A great deal of time is spent in activities necessary to obtain, use, or recover from its effects.
 4. Craving, or a strong desire or urge to use.
 5. Recurrent use resulting in a failure to fulfill major role obligations at work, school, or home.
 6. Continued use despite having persistent or recurrent social or interpersonal problems caused or exacerbated by the effects.
 7. Important social occupational, or recreational activities are given up or reduced because of use.
 8. Continued use despite knowledge of having a persistent or recurrent physical or psychological problem that is likely to have been caused or exacerbated by use.
 9. Tolerance, as defined by either of the following:
 - a. A need for markedly increased amounts of cannabis to achieve intoxication or desired effect.
 - b. Markedly diminished effect with continued use of the same amount of cannabis.
 10. Withdrawal, as manifested by either of the following:
 - a. The characteristic withdrawal syndrome for cannabis (refer below to Criteria A and B of the criteria set for cannabis withdrawal)
 - b. Cannabis (or a closely related substance) is taken to relive or avoid withdrawal symptoms.

Diagnostic Criteria: Cannabis Withdrawal

- A. Cessation of use that has been heavy and prolonged (i.e., usually daily or almost daily use over a period of at least a few months).
- B. Three (or more) of the following signs and symptoms develop within approximately 1 week after Criterion A (cessation of heavy and prolonged use):
 - 1. Irritability, anger, or aggression.
 - 2. Nervousness or anxiety.
 - 3. Sleep difficulty (e.g. insomnia, disturbing dreams).
 - 4. Decreased appetite or weight loss.
 - 5. Restlessness.
 - 6. Depressed mood.
 - 7. At least one of the following physical symptoms causing significant discomfort: abdominal pain, shakiness/tremors, sweating, fever, chills, or headache.
- C. Signs or symptoms of Criterion B cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- D. Signs or symptoms are not attributable to another medical condition and are not better explained by another mental disorder, including intoxication or withdrawal from another substance.

Trends in Cannabis Use Disorder

For more information on cannabis use disorder trends, please refer to the following research articles.

[Marijuana Use, Recent Marijuana Initiation, and Progression to Marijuana Use Disorder Among Young Male and Female Adolescents Aged 12-14 Living in US Household](#)

- ❖ Key finding: Approximately 17% of past year marijuana users ages 12-14 developed marijuana use disorder (MUD) within a year of their first use.

[Higher Average Potency Across the United State is Associated with Progression to First Cannabis Use Disorder Symptom](#)

- ❖ Key finding: There is evidence that use of higher potency cannabis places at increased risk of developing cannabis use disorder (CUD).

[DSM-5 Cannabis Use Disorder in the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions-III: Gender-Specific Profiles](#)

- ❖ Key finding: Women might have faster progression to cannabis use disorder (CUD) after use compared to men.

Notes

†We recognize that "cannabis" is the scientific name for the plant and that many people still use the term "marijuana" in surveys to understand patterns of use, scientific publications and resources including those that are provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. On this page we have chosen to use the term cannabis, but when study findings are reported, we will use the term used in that particular study. No matter what term(s) are used, it is important for parents to be informed and to have conversations with their grown children. We welcome your thoughts and feedback about this page and how to improve it.

‡Examples of other names include weed, pot, hash, blunt, grass, joint, reefer, and skunk.

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Disclaimer: Unfortunately, even with the “best” parenting practices, there is no guarantee that students will refrain from starting to use drugs or alcohol, developing a drug problem, or even worse, experiencing serious drug-related consequences. Conversely, the worst of circumstances does not necessarily predispose one to a life of addiction.