



The U.S. Department of Education's

**HIGHER
EDUCATION
CENTER**

for Alcohol,
Drug Abuse, and
Violence Prevention

E-FACT SHEET

Marijuana Use and New Concerns About Medical Marijuana

While alcohol remains the drug of choice among college students, marijuana ranks number two with 32 percent reporting using marijuana in 2008. That's a modest decline from 2001, when 36 percent of college students reported marijuana use ([Monitoring the Future: National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975–2008, Volume II, College Students & Adults Ages 19–50](#), National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2009). But will a trend toward liberalization of marijuana laws, including increases in the number of states passing or considering medical marijuana bills, lead to increased marijuana availability, higher levels of use, and more problems for students?

What Science Tells Us

While levels of marijuana use by students are determined through a number of national and local surveys, no national samples have been drawn to compare use in states with and without such laws. James Lange, director of Alcohol and Other Drug Initiatives for San Diego State University, points out that there have been no published descriptions on the impact of medical marijuana laws on the use of marijuana by college students, [even though over a dozen states now have some form of medical marijuana](#). Therefore, Lange and his colleague Julie Croff conducted a survey at a large southwestern university and found that 37.5 percent of students reported marijuana use, and of those 5.1 percent had a “medical recommendation” for their use.

Campus Dilemma When It Comes to Medical Marijuana

Just because medical marijuana may be legal in some states, college students with a doctor's prescription may not be allowed to smoke it on campus. For example, on Dec. 16, 2009, campus administrators at Fort Lewis College decided to forbid the use or possession of medical marijuana anywhere on campus and to treat it no differently than alcohol and illicit drugs. But at one point, after Colorado voters effectively legalized medical marijuana in November 2000, campus officials said that the rule governing medical marijuana use was the same as for tobacco, which permits smoking on campus, but not in residence halls.

The Chronicle of Higher Education (Dec. 17, 2009) wrote: “If colleges appear confused about the finer points of medical-marijuana law, that's understandable. Plenty of drugs are legally prescribed and frequently abused on college campuses—the psychostimulants sold as Ritalin and Adderall are just a couple—but marijuana's reputation precedes it. Students were rolling it up and smoking it long before 14 states, including Colorado, passed laws allowing their citizens to use marijuana for its health benefits.”

In an [October 23, 2009, press conference](#), Office of National Drug Control Policy Director R. Gil Kerlikowske said, “Marijuana legalization, for any purpose, remains a non-starter in the Obama Administration. . . . Regarding state ballot initiatives concerning “medical” marijuana, I believe that medical questions are best decided not by popular vote, but by science. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which studies and approves all medicines in the United States, has made very clear that the raw marijuana



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plant is not medicine, and any state considering medical marijuana should look very carefully at what has happened in California.”

More States Considering Medical Marijuana Bills

More states are considering medical marijuana legislation. Currently, in at least five states lawmakers and activists are pushing forward with new medical marijuana laws.

In Virginia, two bills have been introduced in its House of Delegates. One would allow possession of marijuana by patients with a valid marijuana prescription and would protect from prosecution doctors and pharmacists who prescribe or dispense marijuana for patients. The second bill would decriminalize possession of up to one ounce of marijuana (unrelated to medical use), making it a fine-only offense.

In South Dakota medical marijuana advocates have gathered more than twice the number of voter signatures needed to get a medical marijuana measure on the ballot in November that would allow for possession of up to one ounce by qualified patients. Maryland lawmakers are considering a bipartisan medical marijuana bill that would allow possession and use by qualified patients. Currently, Maryland law only provides for an affirmative defense to possession if arrested, but does not preclude a criminal conviction. In addition, lawmakers in Missouri and Alabama have also introduced medical marijuana bills that would allow patients with certain medical conditions to use marijuana to alleviate their symptoms.

The increasing acceptability of medical use of marijuana in the United States poses concerns for marijuana use by teens. The *Monitoring the Future: National Survey Results on Drug Use, 1975–2008, Volume I: Secondary School Students* (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2009) found an increase in marijuana use among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders and attribute the rise, at least in part, to the growing acceptance of marijuana use for medicinal purposes. That trend has made the drug appear less dangerous to teens, the study said.

Policy Implications for Campuses

San Diego State University’s James Lange and Julie Croff believe that anecdotal reports point to medical marijuana as increasingly an issue for campus life. In a presentation at the California Higher Education Alcohol & Other Drugs Education Conference in Long Beach, Calif. (April 2008), they said that the top reasons that students gave in their survey (see above) for using medical marijuana were for insomnia and anxiety and that a marijuana specialist was the most likely source of the recommendation. Use of medical marijuana for conditions such as these may be indicative of “gaming” the system.

“ . . . [E]ven if all medical marijuana use by students is wholly justified, the presence of marijuana may be disruptive and run afoul of campus policies. It is therefore important that each campus make explicit its medical marijuana policy,” explained Lange and Croff.

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