

Does Early Marijuana Use Lead To Abuse of Hard Drugs?

Drug prevention programs often characterize marijuana as the "gateway drug", leading to the illicit use of stronger drugs. Others contend that individuals with a predisposition to marijuana may also be inclined to use stronger drugs and there is no causal relationship. The fact that drug abusers engage in marijuana use at an earlier age than non-abusers is irrefutable. Factors such as genetics, family upbringing, economics and drug availability may play a role.

A recent Australian study by Lynskey et al.¹ attempted to study this association after eliminating genetic and environmental variables. This was accomplished by interviewing 2,765 pairs of twins and finding 311 pairs who differed in their early experience with marijuana. The investigators divided the pairs into those twins who reported marijuana before age 17 and those who never used marijuana or who first used after the age of 17. Twins with early use had a 1.6 to 6 fold greater risk of progressing to future alcohol or drug abuse compared to those who never smoked or began after the age of 17. This increased risk seemed to hold for identical twins, as well as fraternal twins and for males, as well as females.

The association existed for cocaine, hallucinogens, sedatives and opiates. These findings are particularly important in view of the continued escalation of marijuana use among teenagers. Although the findings are not absolute proof of cause and effect, they strongly implicate marijuana as a facilitator of later drug abuse.