

# Harmless? Marijuana-induced psychosis on the upswing

By Josh Kerns

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Since our state's legalization of marijuana, more people are getting high, believing pot is completely harmless.

But mental health professionals are seeing a dramatic increase in problems caused by pot, especially in young people. They worry the lack of awareness about its risks will only make matters worse.

Paul Hunziker is a longtime therapist and licensed chemical dependency specialist. The founder of Family Therapy and Recovery in Renton says researchers have known for years marijuana can lead to everything from paranoia to depression, and the problem is expanding significantly.

"There's always been a difficulty with psychosis being triggered by marijuana, but now with these concentrations it's happening a lot more regularly," he said.

The concentration he's referring to is the THC in all of the new, super-strength marijuana.

"Normal marijuana in the 90's had a concentration of 10-15 percent. Marijuana's moved up to 25-30 percent. But the butane hash oil, we're getting up to 90 percent THC content."

The hash oil, commonly referred to as 'dabbing', is particularly popular with young people, prompting a dramatic rise in mental health problems with teens and young adults, Hunziker said.

Yet unlike all those warnings about possible side effects that come with prescription drugs, you won't see any signs at your local pot shop.

"There's actually a fair bit of research coming out," Hunziker said. "Folks that were on the cusp of having especially psychosis could get kind of pushed over the edge but we didn't know the exact mechanics of it. We're learning more about the specific genes that get activated."

Duane Stone is a veteran Seattle mental health specialist. He's seeing a surprising increase in patients experiencing psychotic episodes as well. Many have never had any mental health problems before.

"I get lots of first break kind where this person doesn't have an experience with mental illness, they don't have a diagnosis, they're 30 or 40-years-old. And the only thing they've been doing has been smoking marijuana for the last year or two," Stone said.

It's not just your stereotypical stoner. They're family people working at places such as Microsoft and Amazon.

"It's a daily kind of thing. I just noticed this profile of a year or two of smoking pot intensely and all of a sudden they get paranoid, and they lose their job and end up in the emergency room," he said.

In some cases, the hallucinations or other breaks from reality go away with medication and cutting off the pot. But in some rarer instances, the symptoms persist.

It doesn't affect everyone the same way. Hunziker says pot appears to trigger specific genes only some people possess.

And he says the drug is challenging because of the way it activates in the brain. The same marijuana can have very different effects depending on the person.

"It affects the higher reaches of the brain, which means that it really has this broad range of effects," Stone said. "It really depends on the person."

Mental health providers like Hunziker say marijuana induced psychosis can be brought on by smoking, eaten or dabbing, with the concentrated has oil causing the most problems.

It's obviously not going to affect everyone that way, and many would be quick to dismiss the observations as overly alarmist.

But Hunziker says at the very least, it should give people pause before they get high - and should be made crystal clear to those that continue to believe it's harmless.

"I guess the advice is we still have decades of research showing that it can increase anxiety, it can increase depression, and it can trigger other mental health conditions," Hunziker said.

"So there are negatives. It's a powerful drug. And we've made it more powerful by creating these concentrated versions."