

Survey: Fewer CO high school students think marijuana is risky

By Thomas Hendrick and Shaul Turner
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DENVER — A 2013 survey has found fewer and fewer Colorado high school students think smoking marijuana is risky to their health.

Researchers have long been concerned about the effects of marijuana on the developing brain — teens and adolescents under the age of 25. Preliminary research has shown that early onset smokers are slower at tasks, have lower IQs later in life and even have a higher risk of stroke.

The survey was conducted by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. It found the percentage of high school students who thought there was moderate or great risk from marijuana declined from 58 percent in 2011 to 54 percent in 2013.

One in five Colorado high school students used marijuana in the past 30 days, and more than a third have used it at some point in their lives, the survey showed.

“If we want Colorado to be the healthiest state in the nation, then we need to make sure our youngest citizens understand the risks of using potentially harmful substances,” Dr. Larry Wolk, executive director and chief medical officer for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment. “Later this month, we’ll launch a youth prevention campaign that encourages kids not to risk damaging their growing brains by experimenting with marijuana.”

While studies show using marijuana has an effect on brain development, the extent of that effect will take years to determine conclusively, said CDPHE spokesman Mark Salley.

With four kids, the McMullen family in Castle Pines is busy. But for them, family time is essential. It’s time dad, Sean McMullen, uses to answer questions his kids may have about marijuana.

“Having open and honest conversations with them, we speak to our kids all the time about how dangerous it is,” he said. But, he said it has gotten more difficult now that pot is legal in the state. “Anytime you send the kids mixed messages, there tends to be that confusion,” McMullen added.

Fifteen-year-old Cassidy McMullen said that may already be the case. “I think more kids are smoking pot because it’s legal, even though they’re not of age, I definitely do think there are more kids.”

Whether the new campaign will steer teens away from marijuana or just forge more conversations about pot use, that's the goal. Dr. Wolk said it's about, "Kids talking to each other. We want parents talking to kids, teachers talking to kids."

Sean McMullen agreed. "It starts in the home."

The same survey also found that cigarette use among high school students on the decline.

Wolk noted that public smoking bans, tobacco taxes, awareness campaigns and enforcement of underage tobacco sales account for the continued decrease in underage cigarette smoking.

"We know what works to protect young people from unhealthy substances," Wolk said. "As with tobacco, youth prevention campaigns will help ensure adult legalization of marijuana in Colorado does not impact the health of Colorado kids."

The Healthy Kids Colorado Survey collects anonymous health information from Colorado middle and high school students every other year. In 2013, the state departments of health, education, and human services launched a unified version of the survey to approximately 40,000 randomly-selected students from more than 220 middle and high schools. Final state and regional results will be available this fall at <http://www.chd.dphe.state.co.us/>.