Marijuana research finds psychosis in pot-smoking teens way up

By Marcus Hondro
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The increased risk of psychosis for pot-smoking teenagers is in the news again. As the drug gets good press with medical marijuana, and legalization in some U.S. states, it appears more teens are smoking it and for many it's leading to grave problems.

It's hardly a new concern as many as a dozen studies have been done that show an increased risk for mental health issues among teens. Reporter Sue Bailey of the Canadian Press has produced the latest story and it includes interviews from front-line workers who deal with the teenage victims of marijuana.

It's not pretty and it's a message some medical practitioners, like Canadian child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr. Sinthu Suntharalingam, say needs to get out there. Dr. Suntharalingam, who works at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa (CHEO) said they are seeing one or two new cases each week.

"I see more and more cases of substance-induced psychosis. The most common substance that's abused is cannabis," she told the CP. "They will present with active hallucinations. Parents will be very scared. They don't know what's going on. They'll be seeing things, hearing things, sometimes they will try to self-harm or go after other people."

Marijuana and teen brains

In March a Harvard Medical School study concluded there exists a "need for widespread education and intervention efforts among youth" after finding teens who started smoking pot before 16 were harming their brains.

Their research showed teens smoking marijuana had poorer scores on tests determining brain damage than the teenagers who started smoking pot later or who did not smoke it at all.

A New Zealand study published in 2012 tracked over 1,000 teens from that country and found that those who used marijuana more than once per week suffered a loss of intelligence. They lost upon average 8 points on IQ tests and the study found that those who went on to quit using marijuana never regained those lost IQ points.

Teens who used the drug but not often and those who did not begin marijuana use until later in life, were not prone to suffering such loss of IQ, the New Zealand study found. Participants were tested at age 13 and again at 38; at five intervals in between they were interviewed about their marijuana usage.

Cannabis not harmless

Other studies have found that marijuana and driving it not a good mix and that people who use marijuana when young have a higher chance of being unemployed by the time they reach their 30s. A study released last month found that marijuana affects growth hormones and can stunt physical development in teenagers.

The Canadian Press spoke to a Dr. Romina Mizrahi, the director of the Focus on Youth Psychosis Prevention clinic and the head of the research program at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto. Dr. Mizrahi had a warning about pot usage, saying that not every teen who smokes it will develop schizophrenia, but an alarming number will.

"Teenagers think that cannabis is harmless," she said. "It is not. And for some people, it's particularly dangerous."