

Original article

Cannabis: A cognitive illusion[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The vision of cannabis as a soft drug is due to the low risk perception that young and old people have of the drug. This perception is based on erroneous beliefs that people have about the drug.

Objective: To compare the beliefs of cannabis use and consequences among adolescents with a lifetime prevalence of cannabis use and those without a lifetime prevalence of cannabis use.

Method: Quantitative, descriptive and cross-sectional study with a probability sample of 156 high school students who completed an *ad-hoc* questionnaire that included sociodemographic data and 22 questions about the beliefs that young people had about cannabis use and its consequences.

Results: The lifetime prevalence of cannabis use was 13.5%. The prevalence group consisted mostly of males. Statistically significant differences between different groups and different beliefs were found. The group with no lifetime prevalence of cannabis use perceived higher risk as regards the damage that cannabis can cause to memory, other cognitive functions, neurons, mental health, and general health. The group with a lifetime prevalence of cannabis use perceived a lower risk as regards the use of cannabis, and think that intelligent people smoke cannabis, and that cannabis has positive effects on the brain, increasing creativity and is used to cure mental diseases.

Conclusions: Those who used cannabis once in their life perceive the use of the substance as less harmful or less potential danger to health compared to those who never consumed. In fact those who consumed at some time even have beliefs that suggest positive effects in those people that consume it.

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Cannabis: una ilusión cognitiva

R E S U M E N

Palabras clave:

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Introducción: La visión del cannabis como una droga blanda responde a una baja percepción de riesgo que jóvenes y adultos tienen de la droga; esta percepción se funda en creencias erróneas acerca de la droga.

Objetivo: Comparar las creencias acerca del cannabis, su uso y sus consecuencias en adolescentes con prevalencia de vida de uso de cannabis y aquellos sin prevalencia de vida de uso de cannabis.

Método: Estudio cuantitativo, descriptivo y transversal que evaluó una muestra probabilística de 156 estudiantes de enseñanza secundaria con un instrumento *ad-hoc* que incluyó datos sociodemográficos y 22 preguntas acerca de las creencias que tienen los jóvenes sobre cannabis, su uso y sus consecuencias.

Resultados: Se hallaron diferencias estadísticamente significativas entre los diferentes grupos y las diferentes creencias. El grupo sin prevalencia de vida de uso de cannabis percibe mayor riesgo del daño que puede ocasionar el cannabis en la memoria, otras funciones cognitivas, las neuronas, la salud mental y la salud general. El grupo de prevalencia de vida de uso de cannabis percibe menos riesgo del uso de cannabis y piensa que la gente inteligente fuma cannabis, que el cannabis tiene efectos positivos para el cerebro, que aumenta la creatividad y que se utiliza para curar enfermedades mentales.

Conclusiones: Quienes consumieron cannabis alguna vez en la vida perciben el uso de la sustancia como menos nocivo o con menor potencial de peligrosidad para la salud que quienes nunca consumieron. De hecho quienes consumieron alguna vez incluso tienen creencias que sugieren efectos positivos en los seres humanos que consumen.

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Introduction

Cannabis sativa, the main active component of which is Δ -9-tetrahydrocannabinol, is the world's most widely used illegal drug.¹ Epidemiological research carried out over the past 10 years indicates that regular cannabis use, amounting to 10 or more cannabis cigarettes per month² during adolescence and adulthood, may have adverse effects.³ 30–50% of substance abuse problems begin in childhood and adolescence.⁴ In Colombia, 11.5% of the population aged between 12 and 65 years has tried marijuana, and the age at onset of consumption is 17.6 years,⁵ with some studies reporting younger ages.⁶

The fact that cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug by young people is due, according to various authors, to the false belief that the drug might only result in minor harm.^{7–10} Beliefs are ideas or generalisations used to interpret reality and are based precisely on references such as personal experiences, information received from others, imagination and inferences.¹¹

Distorted beliefs lead to a subsequent low risk perception, and this plays a vital role with regard to behavioural intention, as people make situational decisions (such as whether to use or not) based on their beliefs or ideas regarding the consequences this will have (positive or negative).¹²

The literature suggests that cannabis use can cause various disorders and alterations in multiple organs and systems, as well as in different areas and functions.^{13,14} Cannabis use can

affect the brain from both a structural and functional point of view, with abnormalities evinced in the hippocampus, amygdala and axonal connectivity.^{15–17}

As regards mental health, scientific evidence suggests a strong association between cannabis use and the onset or worsening of mental disorders such as schizophrenia,^{1,18–24} bipolar disorder,^{25–30} depression,³¹ anxiety attacks³⁰ or panic disorders³² and dependence.^{26,33–35}

The neuropsychological effects of cannabis use have also been widely studied over the past few years³⁶ and it is understood that its use might affect (at least temporarily) short-term memory, working memory, sustained attention, response inhibition capacity, decision making, consequence assessment and the interaction between cognitive events and emotions.^{37,38} The inhibition of these functions might be seen in different spheres, such as a poor academic performance among adolescents^{13,14,39–42} and, although not exclusive to young people, poor driving performance, with high accident and mortality rates recorded.^{43–45}

Cannabis use is also associated with respiratory-type problems such as dyspnoea, pharyngitis, aphonia and asthma exacerbation.⁴⁶ Moreover, and as a result of the substances added by cannabis traffickers (such as silica sand and glass powder), problems such as pneumonitis, mouth ulcers, throat pain and coughs are reported.⁴⁷

Conversely, the positive effects of using the substance generate controversy, at least with regard to creativity. Green et al. suggested in their study that at least 50% of cannabis users

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