

STRONGER TOGETHER

talking with teens about marijuana





ABOUT

The DuPage County Prevention Leadership Team (PLT) is a coalition dedicated to fostering a healthier, safer community by addressing substance misuse and promoting mental well-being. Comprised of local leaders, organizations, and residents, PLT focuses on education, prevention strategies, and collaborative initiatives to reduce risk factors and support positive lifestyle choices to empower individuals and families across DuPage County to thrive.

As part of its efforts, PLT has created this communication guide to help parents, educators, and community members have open, informed, and nonjudgmental conversations with teens, equipping them with accurate information about the risks of marijuana use and encouraging responsible decision-making. **For more information and resources, visit www.dupageplt.org.**

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GUIDE INDEX

3 **Understanding Marijuana**

6 **Illinois Marijuana Laws & Minors**

7 **What Can You Do?**

10 **Answering Frequently Asked Questions**

12 **Resources**

UNDERSTANDING MARIJUANA

Marijuana - commonly referred to as cannabis, pot, kush, or weed - is a psychoactive substance derived from the cannabis plant.⁷ Since January 2020, recreational use of marijuana has been legal in Illinois for individuals aged 21 and older.¹⁰ As marijuana becomes more prevalent in society, it's essential to be informed about its basics, current laws, and the potency of today's marijuana products.

COMMON WAYS MARIJUANA IS USED

- **Smoking:** Marijuana is often rolled into a cigarette-like joint or smoked using a bong or similar device.³
- **Edibles:** Marijuana is added to food or drinks, such as brownies, gummies, or teas, allowing it to be consumed like a regular snack or beverage.³
- **Vaping/Concentrates:** Marijuana is processed into concentrated forms like oils or waxes, which are then inhaled using a vape pen.



Concentrates are typically more potent than traditional marijuana.³

- **Topicals:** Marijuana is incorporated into lotions, balms, and sprays that are applied directly to the skin, usually for localized relief without producing a high.³

POTENCY TODAY VS. EARLIER YEARS

Marijuana has changed significantly over previous years, with today's strains being much more potent. In the 1960s and 70s, marijuana typically contained around 2-5% THC, the compound responsible for its psychoactive effects. Today, many products average 15-30% THC, with some concentrates reaching 90% or higher.⁷ This

increase in potency can amplify effects, including heightened risks of anxiety, dependency, and other mental health challenges.⁷ It's important for parents to understand these changes and have open, informed conversations with their teens about the risks.

HEALTH RISKS FOR TEENS

THC and the Brain

THC is the psychoactive compound found in the cannabis plant. It is responsible for the "high" associated with marijuana use. Since the brain doesn't fully develop until a person is in their mid-20s, THC can affect the teen brain differently than adult brains and lead to:

- Problems with memory, learning, thinking clearly, and problem-solving¹
- Poor school performance that jeopardizes professional and social achievements, and life satisfaction¹
- Impaired coordination and reaction time¹
- Increased risk of mental health problems like depression, anxiety, and psychosis¹

THC and Mental Health

Teens today are dealing with more stress and anxiety than ever before. As marijuana becomes more popular after legalization, some teens may see marijuana as a way to cope with their stress. It's important to know that marijuana can impact mental health in the

UNDERSTANDING MARIJUANA

HEALTH RISKS FOR TEENS

following ways:

- Teen marijuana use has been linked to a higher risk of developing schizophrenia or similar serious mental health disorders.^{1,7}
- THC impacts the brain's ability to regulate emotions, making it harder for teens to manage stress and anxiety.^{1,7}
- Over time, regular marijuana use can lead to tolerance, meaning teens need more to feel the same effects.^{1,7}
- When tolerance develops, stopping marijuana use can cause withdrawal symptoms like irritability, trouble sleeping, loss of appetite and feeling depressed.⁷
- Marijuana use can become disruptive and interfere with a teen's life - for example, being unable to quit, skipping important activities to use, or using it in risky situations like driving.⁷

Marijuana and the Lungs

While the affects of marijuana smoking on teen lungs is still being studied, early research indicates it may affect teens like it does adults.⁷ In adults, smoking marijuana on a regular basis can cause chronic bronchitis.^{1,7} Marijuana smoke has also been shown to injure the cell linings of large airways, which could explain why smoking marijuana can lead to other symptoms such as a chronic cough, phlegm production and wheezing.^{1,7}

VAPING DEVICES - HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

Vaping has become increasingly common among teens, and as a parent, it's important to know that these devices are often designed to be

discreet and easy to hide—sometimes right in plain sight. Vapes can resemble everyday items like USB drives, pens, highlighters, or even hoodie drawstrings, making them difficult to detect. Some are small enough to fit in a closed hand or a backpack pocket without drawing attention. To stay informed, review the different types of vaping devices below.



U.S. Food and Drug Administration. E-Cigarettes, Vapes, and other Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS)

CANNABINOID DERIVATIVES - AN EMERGING TREND

As conversations about marijuana legalization become more common, it's important for parents to understand a new and growing concern: cannabinoid derivatives. These substances are increasingly available online and in stores, often marketed as "legal highs" or "safe" alternatives to marijuana. But for teens, they pose real and serious dangers. Cannabinoid derivatives are synthetic or

UNDERSTANDING MARIJUANA

chemically altered compounds that mimic the effects of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Common examples include Delta-8 THC, Delta-10 THC, HHC (hexahydrocannabinol), and THC-O. While these substances can be derived from hemp, which is legal in Illinois, their psychoactive effects are similar to traditional marijuana—and in some cases, even even stronger.

These products are often sold in vape cartridges, edibles, or oils and are easily found in gas stations, vape shops, and online retailers—often without age verification or regulatory oversight. A 2021 study found that many Delta-8 products were contaminated with heavy metals, residual solvents, or other unknown compounds due to poor manufacturing practices.¹²

One of the reasons cannabinoid derivatives are so attractive to teens is their bright, fun, and playful packaging. Many products are designed to look like candy or snacks, with vibrant colors, cartoon characters, and flavors like “Blue Razz,” “Watermelon Zkittles,” or “Rainbow Punch.” This kind of marketing blurs the line between a dangerous drug and something seemingly harmless or even fun.

In fact, some packages closely mimic popular snack brands, making it easy for teens—or even younger kids—to mistake them for regular treats. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has warned that these products are not only misleading but also dangerous, especially when consumed in high doses or by children.¹¹ Therefore, it's important for parents to look closely at what their teens may be snacking on and look for signs of marijuana use.

SIGNS OF MARIJUANA USE^{10,13}

- Appear dizzy or uncoordinated
- Seem silly and giggly for no reason
- Have very red, bloodshot eyes
- Have a hard time remembering things that just happened

If someone uses marijuana often, they might:^{10,13}

- Have increased irritability or lose interest in and motivation to do usual activities
- Have an odor on their clothes and in their bedroom
- Increase their use of perfume, cologne, or breath mints or incense and other deodorizers in their living spaces or car
- Use eye drops
- Wear clothing or jewelry or have posters that promote drug use
- Have unexplained money use or steal money
- Have items used with drugs such as pipes, bongs, scales, rolling papers, blunt wraps, or vaping products

TEEN USE IN DUPAGE COUNTY

2024 Illinois Youth Survey Results

- In the past 30 days, 4% of 10th graders and 10% of 12th graders reported using marijuana.²
- On average, teens who try marijuana start at age 15.²
- The most common ways teen use marijuana are by vaping or smoking.²
- Teens think more of their peers use marijuana than actually do.²
- Most teens who use marijuana (66% of 10th graders and 70% of 12th graders) get it from their friends.²

ILLINOIS MARIJUANA LAWS & MINORS

As of January 1, 2025

In Illinois, marijuana laws allow for recreational use and possession for adults aged 21 and older under the Cannabis Regulation and Tax Act, which became effective January 1, 2020.⁵ However, these types of laws have specific provisions that directly impact teens:

UNDERAGE USE AND POSSESSION⁵

- It is illegal for anyone under the age of 21 to possess or use marijuana, except for those enrolled in the Medical Cannabis Patient Program with a qualifying condition and a registered caregiver.
- Possession of marijuana by teens without a medical card can result in mandatory fines, community service, and other penalties, including court-ordered drug education programs.

IMPACT ON SCHOOL POLICIES⁵

- Schools may implement zero-tolerance policies regarding substance use. Teens caught with or using marijuana may face school-based disciplinary actions, such as suspension or expulsion.
- Illinois law requires that schools provide alternative education or support programs for students who are impacted by substance use.

DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE⁵

- Teens are subject to Illinois' Zero-Tolerance Law for driving under the influence of marijuana. Any THC detected in their system can lead to license suspension, fines, or other legal consequences.
- Illinois law states that the smell of marijuana can be considered probable cause to conduct a search of the vehicle.

PURCHASE AND SUPPLY⁵

- It is illegal for anyone, including adults, to sell or supply marijuana to teens. Adults who do so may face legal consequences including fines or jail time.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE CONSUMPTION⁵

- It is illegal to smoke marijuana in close physical proximity to anyone under the age of 21 who is not a registered medical cannabis patient. Close physical proximity is not defined.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

RECOGNIZE YOUR INFLUENCE - BE A POSITIVE ROLE MODEL

Your actions—and words—make a difference when it comes to guiding your teen. According to the most recent Illinois Youth Survey, 43% of 10th graders and 50% of 12th graders in DuPage County **have not** had a conversation with their parent or guardian about marijuana in the past year.² When the topic is avoided, teens may assume it's off-limits or unimportant.⁶ Instead, open the door for honest, judgment-free conversations.

Parents can also lead by example with the following actions:

- Avoid using substances in high-risk situations, like drinking and driving.
- Get help if you're struggling with substance use—seeking support shows strength.
- Don't provide substances to your teen.
- Set clear expectations about substance use and communicate them regularly.
- Show that fun, relaxation, and success don't require substances.

PRACTICE THE CONVERSATION BEFOREHAND

Not sure how to start a conversation with your teen about marijuana? You're not alone—and tools like ChatGPT can help. ChatGPT is an AI-powered assistant that can help parents prepare for open, honest discussions about marijuana use and its risks.

Whether you need help phrasing your concerns, practicing responses to tough questions, or finding age-appropriate facts, ChatGPT can provide talking points, conversation starters, and reliable information tailored to your needs. You can even role-play different scenarios to feel more confident going into the conversation. Below are some helpful example prompts that

parents can type into ChatGPT to prepare for these types of conversations:

- "How can I talk to my 14-year-old about the risks of marijuana in a way they'll understand?"
- "What are some conversation starters to discuss marijuana use with my teen?"
- "Help me role-play a conversation where my teen tells me their friends are using marijuana."
- "How do I set clear rules about marijuana use without sounding too strict?"

To use ChatGPT for free, visit chat.openai.com. Without logging in, enter your prompt or question in the chat, and ChatGPT will generate a response. The free version of the software limits how many messages you can send within a given time frame (e.g., 10 messages in 24 hours). Once you hit the limit, you'll need to wait for the timer to reset or upgrade to a paid plan to continue using the service without restrictions.

PRACTICE USING REFUSAL SKILLS AT HOME

- Role play social situations where someone offers your teen marijuana^{6,10}
- Help your teen find the words comfortable for them to refuse offers to use marijuana^{10,13}
- Help your teen learn how to suggest an alternative activity to using marijuana^{10,13}
- Remind your teen that it is okay to walk away from someone, including a friend, who is peer pressuring them into using marijuana.^{6,10,13}

TEACH YOUR TEEN OTHER WAYS TO SAY "NO"

As teens get older, they are often faced with tough decisions, including how to handle peer pressure. Learning to say "no" to marijuana and other substances is a vital skill that can help them

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

make healthier choices and build confidence in their values. Teaching teens different ways to refuse marijuana equips them with tools to handle different social situations. Whether it's using humor, offering an alternative activity, or confidently walking away, these strategies can help teens stand firm in their decisions. Here are some practical approaches to practice together:

• "I just don't want to."

"Let's do something else - how about *[insert activity]*?"

• "I promised my parents I wouldn't."

"I've got a lot going on, and I don't want to risk it.."

• "I have a game tomorrow. I don't want it to impact my performance."

IF YOU SUSPECT YOUR TEEN IS USING MARIJUANA

If you suspect your teen is using marijuana, don't panic. Stay calm, as overreacting can lead to rebellion, anger, or riskier behavior.^{1,10} Instead, focus on open and empathetic communication:

- Give them space to share their thoughts without judgment and seek to understand their reasons for using.¹
- Suggest healthier alternatives, like sports or extracurricular activities, and communicate your concerns with care and support. For example, say, "Using weed can harm your health, and I want to help you stop."¹⁰
- Acknowledge their courage in being honest, validate their feelings, and remind them of existing or new ground rules, ensuring consistent follow-through.¹⁰
- Encourage collaboration to solve problems.^{1,10}
- Reassure them that you're on their side and committed to helping them make positive changes.^{1,10}



OTHER COMMUNICATION TIPS

- Start early! Talk often.^{1,7,10}
- **HOW you say things matters.** Don't have conversations when emotions are strong.
- Be positive, attentive, curious, respectful, loving and understanding.¹⁰
- Keep it grounded and fact-based.⁷
- Set clear expectations about marijuana use, including real consequences for not following family rules.¹⁰
- Reinforce you're a good source of information for questions.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

WHAT TO AVOID

When you find out your teen is using marijuana, it's important to approach the situation thoughtfully. This is not the time for anger, accusations, name-calling, or sarcasm, as these reactions can shut down communication and create defensiveness.¹⁰ Avoid using words like "should," "stupid," "disappointed," or "can't," which can make your teen feel judged, rejected, or ashamed.¹⁰ Harsh language and a confrontational tone can damage trust and make it harder to understand the reasons behind their behavior. Instead, focus on calm, supportive, and constructive dialogue that encourages your teen to open up and work toward positive change.

WHAT IS CANNABIS USE DISORDER?

Cannabis Use Disorder (CUD) is a mental health condition involving a problematic pattern of marijuana use that causes distress or impairs your teen's life.⁴ As a type of substance use disorder, it can range from mild to severe, with marijuana addiction being the most severe form.⁴ Addiction occurs when the brain's reward system amplifies compulsive marijuana use.⁴ It's important to seek medical care as soon as your teen shows signs of CUD. Common signs and symptoms can include, but are not limited to⁴:

- Strong desire or urge to use
- Unsuccessful efforts to reduce or control use
- Spending significant time obtaining, using, or recovering from marijuana
- Struggling with responsibilities at school or home
- Persisting use despite relationship problems or physical/mental health issues
- Avoiding social, work, or recreational activities
- Using in dangerous situations (e.g., driving)
- Developing a tolerance
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms that can only be relieved by more marijuana

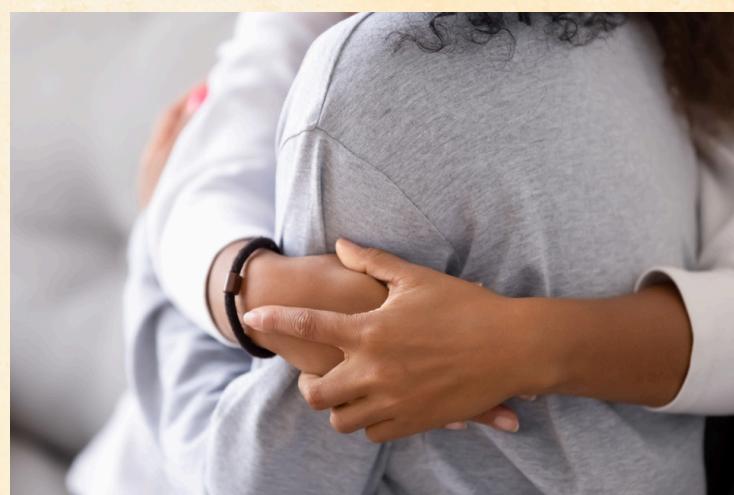
WHEN TO GET HELP

If marijuana use is occasional and experimental, open and honest conversations may be enough. But if use becomes regular or is affecting daily life, it may be time for professional support. Start with a pediatrician or family doctor, who can provide guidance or refer to a specialist. Mental health professionals, such as therapists or school counselors trained in adolescent substance use, and community programs can also provide support tailored to your teen's needs through support groups, counseling, and prevention programs.

Early intervention makes a big difference. Addressing the issue now helps teens make healthier choices and shows them they are not alone.

CONCLUSION

Now you know how to use the information in this guide to talk with your teen about marijuana in a way that's open, supportive, and grounded in facts. These conversations don't have to be perfect—what matters most is showing that you care, you're listening, and you're there to help them make safe, informed choices. Keep the dialogue going, stay curious about their perspective, and let them know your door is always open.



ANSWERING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



WHY IS MARIJUANA BAD FOR TEENS?

Explain to your teen that marijuana use in any form is not safe for the growth of their brain and that smoking marijuana could cause issues with attention, concentration, and learning. This could lead to them doing poorly in school and create a lack of balance and coordination, which could limit performance and increase injury risk when playing sports or driving.

I GOT INVITED TO A PARTY. CAN I GO?

Ask your teen if an adult will be present at the party and whether they think teens will be trying marijuana or other substances. Remind them that even being at a party where there is drug use can get them into trouble.⁸ Use this time to discuss the risks of marijuana and remind them of the behavior you expect from them. Let them know ways they can say "no" or to text a family member a code word if they're put in a situation that makes them uncomfortable.

IS EATING EDIBLES SAFER THAN SMOKING?

Marijuana, no matter how it is used, can be harmful to teen health. Some marijuana products that are eaten or vaporized are more potent than smoked marijuana.¹³ This is because these products are generally much higher in THC concentrations.¹³ In addition, it takes a longer time for the THC to impact the user when they ingest it as opposed to inhaling it. Due to the delayed reaction, users sometimes take one edible and then another when they are not feeling the impact in the expected amount of time. These situations are the most dangerous and are more likely to cause panic attacks and even psychosis.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF I MIXED MARIJUANA WITH OTHER SUBSTANCES?

Using alcohol and marijuana together increases impairment, limiting the ability to function in day-to-day activities and raising the risk of physical harm.³ Similarly, combining marijuana with tobacco may heighten exposure to harmful chemicals, posing greater risks to lung and cardiovascular health.³ Marijuana can also alter the effects of prescription medications, making them less effective.³

ANSWERING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



IF MARIJUANA IS LEGAL, WHY CAN'T I USE IT?

Remind your teen that the legal age of marijuana use in Illinois is age 21 and above. This is because research shows marijuana can have permanent effects on the brain when use begins at a young age.⁸

BUT SO MANY SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE USE IT...

Just because someone is successful now and uses marijuana, doesn't mean they started when they were young.⁷ Remind your teen that the best way to let their brain grow to its full potential is to avoid underage marijuana use.⁷ The teen brain does not stop developing until their mid-20s.

YOU USED MARIJUANA AS A TEEN. WHY CAN'T I?

If you tried marijuana as a teenager, be honest and acknowledge that it was risky.⁸ Segue into a conversation about how marijuana today is significantly stronger and more potent than that of the 80's and 90's. Illinois law does not specify a maximum THC concentration, so it's plausible that some dispensaries may offer products with THC levels approaching up to 95%.⁵ Products with higher concentrations of THC are more harmful to the growing teen brain, are more addictive and have been shown to be associated with psychosis.

Consider telling your teen a relatable story about making smart decisions when it comes to marijuana.⁸ These could be stories that show the consequences of engaging in risky behavior or highlight why you chose to stop using.

BUT YOU USE MARIJUANA...

The teen brain can be harmed by regular marijuana use in ways that the adult brain is not. Human brains do not fully develop until their mid-20s, and large amounts of THC in the brain can impact normal functions such as learning, memory, attention, coordination, and mental health.⁷ Using marijuana as a teen also increases the likelihood that a person will become addicted to marijuana.¹³

RESOURCES

For more information, please visit www.dupageplt.org.

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