

Cannabis may leave permanent damage



Teenagers who become hooked on cannabis before they reach 18 may be causing lasting damage to their intelligence, memory and attention, according to the results of a large, long-term study.

The study was carried out at King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry. The study involved 1000 people followed up over 40 years

Researchers from Britain and the US found that persistent and dependent use of cannabis before the age of 18 may have a so-called neurotoxic effect, but heavy pot use after 18 appears to be less damaging to the brain.

At age 38, all participants were given a battery of psychological tests to assess their memory, processing speed, reasoning and visual processing. Those who had used pot persistently as teens scored significantly worse in most of the tests. Friends and relatives regularly interviewed as part of the study were more likely to report that the heavy cannabis users had attention and memory problems such as losing focus and forgetting to do tasks.

The conclusion is that cannabis is safe for over-18 brains, but risky for under-18 brains. Before the age of 18 the brain is still being organized and remodeled to become more efficient and may be more vulnerable to damage from drugs.



The researchers also found that people who started using cannabis in adolescence and continued for years afterwards showed an average decline in IQ test scores. Adults with fully-formed brains did not show similar mental declines. This decline could not be explained by alcohol, other drug use or educational difficulties. A key variable was the age when they started using pot. Higher IQs also correlate with higher levels of education and income, better health and longer lives.

Previous research on cannabis use has also pointed to potential long-term psychiatric effects. However, it was not possible to say from this latest study what a safer age for persistent pot use might be or what kind of dosage level causes the damage.

Adapted from:

Kelland K. (29 Aug 2012), *Cannabis may leave permanent damage*, [Online] Available: <http://www.timesofmalta.com> (03 Oct 2012)