



Craig Hospital

Redefining Possible for People with Spinal Cord and Brain Injuries

Provided as a courtesy of
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Marijuana and Other Drugs after Disability

Choose a path to a Healthier Lifestyle

Coping with a disability isn't easy. It can lead people to misuse marijuana, stimulants, and depressants and this can seriously hurt them. Here's some information you can use to make healthier choices.

Do any of these stories apply to you?

- Jim's spasms are so bad; he takes twice his dose of prescription relaxants, so he can enjoy happy hour with his co-workers...
- Sally is exhausted and depressed after a full day of rehabilitation. She takes the muscle relaxants her doctor prescribed – and then decides to drink wine with dinner...
- Alan's job search is difficult and he's worried. He's eager to prove his disability won't hold him back so he takes "uppers" for a boost...
- When Ronald's friends offer him a joint, he accepts. He wants to "get back in the swing of things" since his injury...
- Marcel is in pain. Several doctors prescribed painkillers, which he can take "as needed" for his injury. He starts taking several different drugs at once...

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About the Issue

Many people with disabilities use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, often for the same reasons as people who do not have disabilities. However, there are also reasons related to disability which increase the pressure to drink, smoke, or take illicit drugs. They include:

- Social isolation
- The use of habit-forming medicines
- Chronic pain
- Too much free time
- Feeling lonely and depressed
- Wanting to fit in with friends
- Supporting efforts toward independence

If a family member with a disability uses alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs, he or she could have serious health problems as a result. For some people with disabilities, any use of alcohol or other drugs can be very dangerous. This happens because of the way the person's body and mind react to the medicines they use. For example, some people who have nervous system disabilities can have seizures if they drink alcohol or other drugs.

Marijuana

Laws in some states have made it easy for people to obtain marijuana under a doctor's order. At this time, marijuana is still a violation of federal law. Federal laws, or laws that govern all 50 states, over-ride state laws in court.

There are clinical uses of marijuana for people who are experiencing some illnesses, like cancer. **But, the effects of marijuana on people with spinal cord injury and brain injury are more harmful than beneficial.** This is why *Craig Hospital and CNS physicians do not condone, support, or prescribe marijuana.*

Smoking marijuana impairs orientation and mobility. It can slow your reaction time, and make the simplest tasks more difficult. It also irritates the throat and lungs, increasing the chance of respiratory infections and interferes with learning and motivation.

Marijuana also interacts with many prescription medications prescribed after SCI and TBI. The effects of mixing common medications you now take with marijuana can cause dangerous side effects on your heart, brain, and mental health. Also, marijuana can interfere with medication schedules – speeding up or slowing down the effects of medicine.

Marijuana and Other Drugs after Disability

Marijuana +	Effects on the body
Brain	Marijuana changes your view of reality. May have trouble with memory and learning and troubling thinking clearly and solving problems. Also, loss of coordination slows your ability to respond quickly. All of these effects can persist for weeks after stopping use.
Emotions	Marijuana use makes you more likely to be depressed or anxious. You may experience loss of interest in life, work, family, and friends. It is not uncommon for relationships to get worse and to have work and school suffer.
Lungs	Marijuana contains 50% to 70% more cancer-causing chemicals than tobacco smoke. Users inhale more deeply and keep the smoke in their lungs much longer than tobacco users which can increase the amount of tars and chemicals that build up in the lungs. Because marijuana smoke is not filtered, one joint is equal to 10 to 40 tobacco cigarettes. Marijuana smokers have more chronic coughs and lung infections than nonsmokers
Heart	Marijuana increases blood pressure and heart rate by 20-50%. The carbon monoxide inhaled can decrease the blood's ability to carry oxygen.
Immune System	THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, can change the way the body fights infection and cancer.
Pregnancy	Smoking marijuana while pregnant can cause lasting effects on a child. The baby may not grow normally. The child can have more behavioral problems and problems with learning language, attention, and memory
Abrupt discontinuation	After chronic use of marijuana, abruptly stopping use can lead to agitation, apprehension, aggressiveness, tremors, difficulty sleeping, and uncontrolled sweating.

Stimulants

Stimulants, such as cocaine and “uppers,” stimulate your central nervous system for a short time. This high is only temporary, and when you come down, you feel lower than before you took the drug.

These drugs:

- Make it hard for you to sleep
- Cause panic attacks
- Cause a sudden increase in blood pressure and increase the risk of a stroke
- Counteract blood pressure medicines
- Make you lose your appetite, causing weight loss
- Work against any prescribed relaxants

Depressants

Depressants are used to lower pain and anxiety. Examples include Valium, Codeine, Percodan, Librium, tranquilizers, and sleeping pills. It is very easy to develop a physical tolerance to them and to overdose.

These drugs:

- Cause dangerous, even ***fatal*** reactions when mixed with other depressants like alcohol or marijuana
- May make you slow and numb if not taken properly
- Interfere with orientation, mobility, and reaction time

The Good News:

Drug use after disability is often in response to negative situations such as loss, grief, loneliness, retirement or illness. Strategies for dealing with these losses could include cutting down isolation, addressing depression, and reducing the stressors of aging.

The good news is that many of the factors involved with taking drugs – health problems, loss of self-esteem, too much free time, isolation, depression, financial worries, family changes – are issues you’ve successfully dealt with before. Your job is to fall back on those coping skills and remember: *You know how to do this.*

“Rehabilitation success requires commitment, energy, and determination... Rehabilitation requires sobriety.”

*-James S. Jeffers, Director
Maryland Division of
Rehabilitation Services*

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