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POT OR NOT?

More women than ever are turning to marijuana to relieve depression and anxiety, but some experts argue the herb could do more harm than good. *Natural Health* investigates.

EMMA TOOK HER FIRST hit of pot when she was 14, though you'd never call the 22-year-old college student a stoner. Like many young women, she occasionally smokes with friends. It wasn't until last year, when she had her first panic attack, that she began to look at the drug differently. "I was stressed about school and work," Emma says. She was also having trouble focusing and even getting out of bed: "That wasn't like me." She tried five prescriptions for anxiety and depression. "One made me unable to orgasm; another put me in a daze," she recalls.

What did help: lighting up. "After I smoke pot, I

feel calmer and think more clearly. It helps me accomplish tasks that would normally make me anxious, like writing papers," she says. She was so struck by weed's effects that she relayed her symptoms to her doctor, who filled out paperwork for Emma to obtain medical cannabis in her home state of Massachusetts. "It brings instant relief for my anxiety and makes me a happier, more pleasant person," she says.

Like Emma, a growing number of the 40 million-plus Americans who suffer from anxiety and depression may soon be experimenting with weed to ease their symptoms.



The concentration of chemicals in weed varies from bag to bag.

After all, medical marijuana is now legal in 20 states (with recreational use allowed in Washington and Colorado). But does reefer work for anything other than inducing a fit of giggles—or an irresistible craving for Ben & Jerry's? And can the substance actually negatively affect anxious or depressed users? The answers are far from clear.

A KINDER, GENTLER FORM OF POT

Cannabis has been used to treat various maladies for thousands of years. Every hemp plant contains more than 80 cannabinoids, including THC (the compound that makes you high) and cannabidiol (or

CBD). Though most of us have heard of THC, it's CBD, first isolated by scientists in 1940, that may be responsible for Mary Jane's medicinal effects. These include quelling anxiety, alleviating pain and side effects from chemotherapy, easing symptoms from neurological disorders, such as multiple sclerosis and epilepsy, and combatting insomnia.

"Pot has tremendous medical potential, but there's a lot we don't know—research is still being hampered in this country," says Julie

Holland, M.D., a psychopharmacologist in New York City and editor of *The Pot Book*. CBD, for instance, was initially thought to be inactive since when ingested on its own, it didn't induce any wobbly, euphoric feelings. But a number of recent studies, mostly conducted in Canada, Europe and Israel, suggest that CBD has potent medicinal power. A 2011 report found that CBD even eased the terror of public speaking in people with social anxiety disorder. Because of its supposed effects, CBD is being used in products beyond plain old pot—such as capsules, body balms and even chewing gum.

When it comes to exploring the possible medical benefits of marijuana in the U.S., however, doctors are blazing their own trails. "I knew cannabis eased certain neurological disorders, but I wanted to see what else it could do," says Stacey Kerr, M.D., a retired family physician in Santa Rosa, Calif., who's researching pot's potential to help people with mood

"My patient called me in tears, saying that it worked better and faster on her anxiety than any prescription."

disorders. "I had a patient with metastatic cancer who was experiencing a lot of anxiety," Kerr recalls. "She she was skeptical about pot. She told me, 'I don't want the woozies.'" The patient was willing to try CBD blended into honey butter in lieu of the antianxiety drugs her doctor had recommended. Says Kerr: "Afterward, she called me in tears, saying that it worked better and faster on her anxiety than any prescription."

Holland also hears cannabis testimonies from patients: "They tell me it's great for helping them calm down, shift gears and get to sleep." That's not surprising, given the drug's reputation for inducing a mellow state of mind. But in the same way that the buzz from one or two drinks wears off in an hour or two, marijuana's effects on emotions tend to be fleeting. "The difference between prescription

antidepressants and pot or alcohol is that the former can help rebalance mood-regulating neurotransmitters in the brain; the latter just numbs you temporarily," says Marc Fishman, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. "Pot or booze fail to fix the underlying problem; rather, they give you an artificial rush of happiness. Over time, neither one is a sustainable way to get relief."

A MIXED (DIME) BAG

A key difference between a traditional Rx and whatever you nab from your local dealer? Consistency: Street marijuana isn't regulated in the same way as prescription drugs, which means that you can't be sure of what's inside that little baggie. Unless you live in a state where medical marijuana is legal and can qualify to buy purer dispensary products, "you just don't know what you're getting," cautions Martha Montemayor, owner of Healthy Choices Unlimited, a Colorado clinic that, among other things, performs medical marijuana evaluations.

Another problem with substituting dope for Prozac: CBD-rich bud isn't easy to get your hands on. For obvious reasons, most pot on the street contains large concentrations of THC, designed to provoke a *This is great stuff, man*, reaction. "And people who work at dispensaries are often more like bartenders than pharmacists," Kerr



How much toking is too much?

"Most people can smoke a little marijuana on the odd weekend without harm," says Marc Fishman, M.D. But refrain if any of the following are true:

You're experiencing moderate or severe anxiety or depression.

"One of the worst things someone in that situation can do is to get pot that's high in THC and end up more anxious than she was before," says Stacey Kerr, M.D.

You're smoking more and more to achieve the same high.

"When people progress to frequent use and are in an intoxicated state nearly every day—where being high becomes normal—that's problematic," Fishman warns.

Pot is adversely affecting your work, family or financial situation.

"When I see patients smoking a lot, I'll ask, 'Is it truly helping you function—or are you using it to avoid dealing with your issues?'" Kerr says.

notes. You can't be absolutely sure that what you're inhaling will actually calm you down, help you sleep or ease depression. Adding to the trouble, THC-rich weed can actually *increase* anxiety. "If you get too much THC, you can experience rapid heartbeat, paranoia and dizziness," Montemayor says.

And though the research is mixed, several major studies suggest that chronic pot use can exacerbate depression, as well as impair cognitive skills and memory—not just while a person is under the influence, but over the long term. A less common, but even more troubling side effect: "If someone is vulnerable to schizophrenia, they may have a psychotic break earlier if they smoke pot," Holland warns.

Ultimately, though, MJ affects people differently, depending on their emotional makeup—and the blend. "If depression is your issue, THC may be more uplifting, and CBD more calming," Montemayor says. "It's about finding the right combination." Unless you have access to a dispensary that offers precise blends of cannabis, with higher or

lower concentrations of THC and CBD, that means experimenting with whatever strains your source has available.

This imprecision makes many traditional physicians uncomfortable, to say the least. So does the lack of large, randomly controlled clinical trials—the kind needed to get a substance approved by the FDA. "Any physician who prescribes weed for depression is an idiot," says Fishman, who is also medical director of Maryland Treatment Centers. "There's just no clear scientific evidence that it's helpful for emotional issues." It's one thing, he says, to grab the occasional drink or joint to relax. "But it's unreasonable for a doctor to say, 'Take three martinis—or tokes—for your depression and call me in the morning.'"

Of course, a raft of widely publicized studies suggest that prescription antidepressants are not necessarily

much more effective than placebos, either. But as Fishman points out, when you use marijuana to self-medicate, you tend to need more and more of it to get the same benefit. "Over time, pot and certain other intoxicants hijack the brain's feel-good dopamine reward pathways, so you have to take more to get that surge," he explains. "That typically doesn't happen with antidepressants."

AN IMPERFECT SOLUTION

Kerr agrees that more research is crucial, especially well-designed studies that meet scientific journals' tough standards. In a survey by The Society of Cannabis Clinicians, 25 percent of the roughly 400 female respondents gave CBD-rich cannabis a 10 out of 10 for reducing anxiety; 26 percent gave it a 10 for mood improvement. "Many said they'd stopped taking prescription drugs like

Paxil or Xanax," Kerr says.

Not that pot is a panacea. "There's no question that people can use it compulsively, or as an escape," Holland says, "but at least it's less toxic than many other drugs and medications." Indeed, while you may have a bad reaction to a toke, most experts agree that you won't die of a pot overdose. "Compare that to the 300 people a year who die from acetaminophen!"

Montemayor points out. You most likely won't become an addict, either—only 9 percent of people who ever smoke weed eventually become dependent on it, the same rate as alcohol and lower than the 32 percent who get hooked on tobacco. Bottom line: Like almost any medication, prescription or no, cannabis can give you unasked-for side effects. "But ideally," Montemayor says, "it should be available as another tool in the doctor's kit." ♦



In many states where pot is legal, depression isn't a qualifying condition.