

Evidence cannabis use more harmful than thought

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Reporter: Jean Kennedy

MARK COLVIN: Marijuana has been dismissed for a long time as a "soft" drug, compared with the likes of heroin or speed. But more evidence is coming to light of the harm, both mental and physical, that cannabis can cause, especially with long-term use.

Now the National Council on Drugs has put together a handbook about cannabis. It might come in handy for someone you know, given the estimates that close to 300,000 Australians smoke pot every day.

Jean Kennedy has been talking to the experts, and filed this report for *PM*.

SALLY: You can see your life slipping away. It just has a hold of you in such a way where you just can't stop it and it just robs you of everything as well as yourself.

JEAN KENNEDY: Sally has been a marijuana smoker, or more accurately an addict, for more than half of her 46 years.

SALLY: I first got introduced to cannabis when I was in my early 20s. I was about 22-23 and the first time I tried it was just a joint and I can just remember the very first time I tried cannabis the way it made me feel. It just gave me a relaxed, mellow feeling and I thought this is okay. I couldn't see it as a harmful drug.

JEAN KENNEDY: But before long she was hooked and smoking a large amount of cannabis daily.

SALLY: I liked the sound the smell and everything of the bong and that was the way I took it.

JEAN KENNEDY: So how quickly did you become dependent on it and how heavily dependent do you think you were?

SALLY: I'd say instantly because growing up I never, ever felt like a part of society. I had drug and alcohol parents. I wasn't raised up by them and I just felt like I didn't fit in anywhere, even at school, and I didn't like myself very much at all and once I started smoking pot it just made me feel like I belonged somewhere.

JEAN KENNEDY: According to the National Council on Drugs, around 300,000 Australians use cannabis every day and just shy of two million have smoked it in the last year alone. It's one of many facts about the drug which might surprise you.

The Council's Professor Margaret Hamilton says there's a lot of misinformation about cannabis use which needs to be cleared up.

MARGARET HAMILTON: One of the misconceptions is that it's harmless. Another misconception is at the other end of that spectrum, which is that it causes schizophrenia.

Another misconception is that it's very different now to what it used to be in the 60s, 70s and 80s. All of those have aspects of them that have truth but on their own are not truthful.

JEAN KENNEDY: If we can just run through some of those issues, is it an addictive drug?

MARGARET HAMILTON: It certainly is and that's one of the reasons that people like to use it because it does actually influence how we think, how we feel and how we behave.

JEAN KENNEDY: Is it psychologically addictive or physically addictive, or both?

MARGARET HAMILTON: It's both, so people develop a dependency syndrome on it, particularly psychological and they find themselves needing it and then not able to do their daily, usual activities.

JEAN KENNEDY: Well what sort of harm is it causing? How dangerous a drug is it in your opinion?

MARGARET HAMILTON: Some people, even at early use, can get into trouble with it on an acute basis. So, it certainly is associated with an increased likelihood of mental health problems, especially anxiety and depression. Those are the two common conditions that are most associated with its use.

For a very small proportion of people who may have a predisposition to a psychotic illness, such as schizophrenia, it may well be that it triggers the appearance of that psychosis.

JEAN KENNEDY: But she says that while people who use cannabis now use more than they used to, overall cannabis use in Australia is actually decreasing.

It's a fact that the Prime Minister John Howard highlighted yesterday, while suggesting that the Australian community has come to back the Government's tough-on-drugs policy, and its principle of zero tolerance.

But the Council says there needs to be more emphasis on diverting addicts into education and treatment.

Like Sally, 34-year-old Gary has been taking part in a rehabilitation program at the WHO's clinic in inner Sydney, which stands for "We Help Ourselves".

It's not the first time either of them have been through the process.

Gary says he started smoking dope from the age of 14 but became increasingly addicted. For the past 15 years he's been heavily addicted and feels life has just passed him by.

GARY: The insidious and nasty thing about cannabis use is that it's got such a soft, harmless reputation and it takes a long, long time for people to get, for people to become aware.

JEAN KENNEDY: How dangerous a drug do you think it is?

GARY: Very dangerous and it's reputation for being soft and harmless makes it so dangerous.

MARK COLVIN: Cannabis user Gary ending Jean Kennedy's report.

Transcript

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