

# Marijuana has negative impact on youth with psychiatric disorders: study

BY CHARLIE FIDELMAN, GAZETTE HEALTH REPORTER MAY 2, 2014



Susanne Serres, 23, and Cynthia Sanon, 25, pose for a photograph at the Notre-Dame hospital in Montreal on Friday. The two youth suffered psychotic episodes and were able to recover with support from friends, family and the healthcare system.

**Photograph by:** Dario Ayala, The Gazette

Drug abuse really does have a negative impact on youth with psychiatric disorders, and at least one illicit drug, marijuana, should be raising alarms bells, researchers warn after presenting preliminary results Friday from a two-year Montreal study.

A hands-on team, created by the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal 15 years ago to help troubled youth with psychosis, held a conference at Notre-Dame Hospital to present treatment innovations.

Psychosis is described as a loss of contact with reality. Symptoms include visual and auditory hallucinations, confusion, delirium, bizarre thoughts and these are often accompanied by anxiety and panic attacks.

The team, led by psychiatrist Amal Abdel-Baki, head of the CHUM's psychosis services program for youth, followed 212 young adults, average age 23, many with drug abuse issues — once they had

been hospitalized for an episode of psychosis.

Those who managed to quit using alcohol and drugs improved, Abdel-Baki said. They had fewer symptoms, reduced their use of hospital emergency rooms and tended to return to school or work at the same pace as young adults without a history of substance abuse.

“The impact of what we saw is that they functioned socially as well as those who never took drugs and better than those who continued to abuse drugs,” Abdel-Baki told The Gazette.

Those who remained drug abusers continued to have psychotic symptoms and show up at the ER, and had difficulties finding work or returning to class. However, a striking finding is that one group did worse than all others — the pot users.

Alcohol and other substance users improved much slower than those who stopped using drugs, but they still showed some improvement, Abdel-Baki said.

“What we realized, is that young adults who use cannabis continued to deteriorate with time, despite treatment,” Abdel-Baki said. “We asked ourselves, ‘Are all drugs equally bad?’ ”

Researchers noted that in their study, the most harmful effects were seen in people who used cocaine, speed and crack. Initially, the stimulant users appeared to be struggling with more problems than the pot users. They had more psychotic symptoms, more violence and a much harder time quitting than the pot users.

They were targeted from the get-go for intensive therapy. “It was the way we took charge of them. We brought out the canons, the most intensive treatment that we have for them. We tended to treat them more aggressively,” Abdel-Baki said, by seeking court-mandated therapy to provide anti-psychotic medication by injection. “And these youths improved, there were fewer relapses.”

In contrast, perhaps researchers trivialized the effect of cannabis because, in the beginning, users’ symptoms were less severe, she said.

“Perhaps they deteriorated because we didn’t treat them aggressively enough?”

In fact, the research suggests that problems of mental health and drug abuse, regardless of the substance that is being consumed, should be taken seriously, Abdel-Baki said.

Those who treat addictions demand patients go for mental health services first; and mental health sends them to detox centres, she added.

“We know that the two issues — mental health and addiction — should be treated at the same time, and by the same team,” Abdel-Baki said.

Apart from medication, participants in the CHUM clinics also had group therapy and were paired with social workers to help them find lodgings and improve social reintegration.

Previous studies have linked early cannabis use among some teens with increased risk of developing addiction and mental health problems as adults.

Last August, a review of 120 studies examining cannabis and teenage brain development by researchers from Udm and New York's Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital concluded that there's strong evidence that early pot use can interfere with the development of the adolescent brain.

"What we know is that the younger the exposure, the higher the risks for negative outcomes for cognitive problems and psychosis as opposed to the 40-year-old who uses cannabis," said Didier Jutras-Aswad, a CHUM psychiatrist and researcher, and one of the authors of the study.

"Generally, cannabis is not a problem but that depends on who is using because individual factors can modify the risk," Jutras-Aswad said. "The question is not about whether cannabis is good or bad, but who is more likely to suffer from problems?"

The teen population at risk that should be monitored includes those with a genetic predisposition or a family history of mental illness as well as behavioural traits like, for example, being impulsive, anxious and easily depressed.

[cfidelman@montrealgazette.com](mailto:cfidelman@montrealgazette.com)

Twitter: HealthIssues

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette