

Press Release

September 7, 2026

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Cannabis Use Disorder Among Young People Linked to Diagnosis of Psychiatric Disorders

A new study led by Johns Hopkins researchers published in the American Journal of Psychiatry found that young people with Cannabis Use Disorder were more likely than young people with other substance use disorders to later be diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder. In contrast, adults with cannabis use disorder were significantly less likely to develop psychiatric disorders, compared to adults with other substance use disorders.

The study found that the relative risk of young people age 17 and under with cannabis use disorder was 52% higher for schizophrenia, 30% higher for recurrent major depression, and 21% higher for anxiety disorders, compared to young people with other substance use disorders. Adults with cannabis use disorder had lower relative risks for being diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder.

The findings highlight the question of whether excessive cannabis use, perhaps more than other substances, might alter brain development of young people, predisposing them to developing a psychiatric disorder. The research indicates relative risk depends on the user's age.

Products made from the *Cannabis sativa* plant have been used recreationally in the U.S. since at least the 1800s. Their popularity increased during alcohol prohibition in the 1920s and the counterculture movement in the 1960s. Today, cannabis use by adults age 21 and older is legal in 24 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. Surveys suggest daily use of cannabis is higher than alcohol consumption.

Much of research interest in this topic arose from the recent legalization of recreational cannabis in Maryland, in 2023, and other states. It is imperative to understand cannabis-related psychotic disorders clinicians are seeing in the context of other substance-related psychotic disorders.

The link between cannabis and psychosis first appeared in medical literature in the early twentieth century. In 1987, a study of more than 45,000 Swedish army recruits found that the use of cannabis at the time of conscription was associated with large increases in the risk of subsequent schizophrenia, especially when the cannabis use was heavy. Other studies since then have found similar associations.

For the study, the researchers analyzed nearly 700,000 U.S. medical records from a large commercial database. They identified patients who had been diagnosed with cannabis use disorder—a condition that implies relatively heavy cannabis use—but had not been diagnosed with other psychiatric disorders. They then matched these patients on measures such as age, sex, ethnicity, and income level, with patients who had been diagnosed with other, non-cannabis substance use disorders and did not have other psychiatric conditions. The researchers compared the rates of subsequent schizophrenia and other psychiatric diagnoses in these two patient groups—adults age 18 and older (691,806 patients) and one for those age 17 and under (49,586 patients).

The median age among patients with cannabis use disorder was 16 versus 15 among patients with other substance use disorders. About 10% of patients in the cohort of all substance use disorders were under age 12. The authors note that this aligns with reports from adult patients being treated for substance use disorder: 10.2% reported starting substance use at age 11 or younger.

Adults in the cannabis use disorder group had a 19% lower risk (0.34% vs. 0.42%) of subsequent schizophrenia compared to the group with other substance use disorders. Risks of subsequent psychosis, recurrent major depression, and suicide attempts were also lower in the cannabis-use group.

The results are consistent with the idea that heavy cannabis use predisposes young people to subsequent schizophrenia and some other psychiatric disorders that they might not develop otherwise. Researchers maintain this acceleration effect could make these illnesses seem less likely at later ages, thus appearing to lower the risk in adults, at least in relation to other recreational drugs. They do caution however, that the causation might point in the other direction, with individuals who are innately more likely to develop certain psychiatric disorders to also have a greater tendency to self-medicate with cannabis, even before their mental health issues have become evident.

There are still many unknowns however it is never recommend that teenagers use cannabis, especially not the high-potency cannabis products that are on the market today.

SAFE is the only alcohol and substance use prevention agency in Glen Cove. Its Coalition is concerned about cannabis use- especially in youth as their brains are developing. The Coalition is

conducting a prevention awareness campaign entitled “Keeping Glen Cove SAFE; Underage Marijuana Use,” to educate and update the community regarding marijuana use and its negative consequences. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE’s website to learn more about Cannabis/Marijuana use at www.safeglencove.org.