**Pros and Cons of Legalizing Recreational Marijuana**

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Legalized marijuana for recreational use is now a reality in states like Washington and Colorado. Voters in those states passed ballot initiatives to legalize the drug for recreational use. It’s a move that has raised plenty of questions: How would decriminalization affect local government and law enforcement? Will it increase the rate of addiction to marijuana and other drugs? How does the legalization of recreational weed affect the addiction treatment community?

Legalizing Marijuana Pros

Revenue boost:

As state and local governments struggle with rising costs and decreased revenue, many are looking for creative ways to increase income to pay for everything from road repairs to new parks. Some believe that marijuana legalization could be a windfall in the form of new taxes applied to its distribution and sale. In Colorado, for example, analysts suggest that taxing the drug could raise between $5 and $22 million annually [[1](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/19/pot-could-be-tax-windfall_0_n_1897910.html)].

More effective law enforcement and criminal justice:

Many advocates for legalization note that by decriminalizing the substance, police officers will have more time and money to pursue criminals for other crimes, including those involving violence. They also argue it would create wiggle room in the criminal justice system, allowing prosecutors and judges to focus on violent crimes while freeing space in crowded prisons. One study estimates that nationwide marijuana legalization would save governments $8.7 billion each year [[2](http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/making-economic-case-legalizing-drugs)].

Less money supporting organized crime:

Legalizing recreational weed cuts off an important revenue stream for many in the illegal drug trade. Advocates of legalization contend that by making the substance less profitable for criminals, it will decrease the violence associated with the trade. The result could save lives while taking pressure off of law enforcement.

Safety controls:

When a person buys marijuana off the street, there’s no way to know exactly what dangerous substances are cut into the drug. While current legalization efforts don’t directly address safety issues, they do create a framework for a safety control system, which would work to eliminate some of the risk that comes from smoking a substance potentially laced with toxic ingredients.

Wider access for medicinal use:

Some people from inside and outside the medical community argue that the drug is an effective treatment for a range of conditions, including epilepsy, Crohn’s disease, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and multiple sclerosis (MS). In more than a dozen states, including California, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, medical marijuana use is already legal under certain guidelines. The decriminalization of weed would allow more people to use the drug for its believed health benefits.

Legalizing Marijuana Cons

Addictive nature:

Legal marijuana supporters have argued that it’s not as addictive as other “harder” drugs, such as heroin and cocaine. Addiction treatment specialists, however, have seen firsthand that long term use does lead to marijuana addiction. Research suggests as many as 10% of users will develop dependence over time. As with other substances, stopping marijuana use leads to withdrawal symptoms that range from irritability to anxiety [[3](http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/marijuana)]. Opponents of legal recreational pot argue that any savings that would arise from legalization would be offset by the cost of treating the additional users who become addicted to marijuana.

Altered perception:

Marijuana is a drug; and a drug, by definition, changes the way the body works. Marijuana users experience a high that alters the way they perceive things while under the influence. For example, low-to-moderate doses of the drug distort perception enough to trigger car accidents. One study showed that marijuana was the most prevalent illegal drug found in impaired or fatally injured drivers [[4](http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/drugged-driving#references)].

Gateway drug status:

Many addiction treatment specialists believe marijuana is a gateway drug with the potential to introduce a user to more serious illegal substances, like cocaine or heroin. Research also suggests that its use may be linked to a higher risk of prescription drug use. A recent Yale University School of Medicine study revealed that teenage boys who abused alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana were 2 to 3 times more likely to abuse prescription drugs during young adulthood. Marijuana use alone was associated with increased prescription abuse in the teenage girls examined through the study [[5](http://news.yale.edu/2012/08/21/teens-who-smoke-and-drink-may-be-more-likely-abuse-prescription-opioids-later)]. Legalization, then, could increase societal and financial costs for treating those who are introduced to heavier drugs by smoking marijuana.

Brain health:

The jokes about pot users and their horrible memories are not an urban legend simply put forward by everyone from Hollywood movies to addiction treatment centers. For example, one study suggests the vessels in the brain of a marijuana smoker restrict blood flow, and continue to do so even after a month of abstinence [[6](http://www.aan.com/press/index.cfm?fuseaction=release.view&release=250)].

Lung health:

While tobacco has a bad reputation for pumping carcinogens into the lungs, marijuana is estimated to have levels of carcinogens that are 50-70% higher than tobacco smoke. The effect is amplified by the fact that many pot smokers inhale more deeply than cigarette smokers, increasing the amount of time the lungs are exposed to cancer-causing chemicals [[7](http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/marijuana)].

Heart health:

Using marijuana raises the heart rate from 20% to 100% for up to 3 hours after it’s been smoked. This increase boosts the risk of several problems including heart palpitations, arrhythmias, and heart attack. Its effect on the heart can make smoking the drug a high-risk activity for seniors or people living with cardiac conditions [[8](http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/marijuana)].

Mental health:

Studies suggest a link between marijuana use and mental illnesses, like depression and schizophrenia. Researchers aren’t yet sure if the marijuana triggers these conditions, or if smokers turn to the drug to self-mediate their symptoms [[9](http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/marijuana)]. However, it is clear that marijuana use plays some role in the mental health picture.

The movement to legalize marijuana is becoming a reality in some areas. For local governments, law enforcement officials, the judicial system, and addiction treatment specialists affected by the shift, it will continue to be important to work together to create communities that are free from addiction-and its devastating emotional, physical, and financial effects.