

Marijuana Use Linked to Elevated Heart Attack Risk

As more states legalize marijuana, recreational use has gone up significantly, and with it concern for the heart health of habitual users. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), the chemicals in cannabis have been linked to an increased risk of heart attack, heart failure and atrial fibrillation in observational studies.

A new study bolsters these claims. Research recently published in the [Canadian Medical Association Journal](#) shows that smoking, vaping or even consuming cannabis as an edible nearly doubles the risk of a heart attack in adults under age 45, compared to those who don't use the drug.

"The impact is the same. So it's not like smoking cannabis is worse and eating is not. It's the same physiological impact to your body, which is pretty deleterious."

Dr. Sudhir Mungee is an interventional cardiologist at OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute. He says these findings aren't surprising. Marijuana is considered an alkaloid, a plant-based compound that causes pronounced physiological actions on humans, including on the heart.

"All of these alkaloids, as they are called, they raise your heart rate – so tachycardia," Dr. Mungee explains. "They have the potential to make your heart go out of rhythm. So it means because the heart rate goes faster, there is more demand. The supply is the same. So obviously there is a mismatch. And the other thing it does is what we call endothelial dysfunction. The lining of the blood vessels can get damaged because of cannabis, smoking. All of these factors are exactly what the causes of heart attacks are."

The researchers surveyed more than 33,000 adults ages 18-44. Of these respondents, 17% reported using marijuana within the past 30 days, and of them, 1.3% later suffered a heart attack. This was compared to the only 0.8% of participants who had a heart attack and didn't use the drug.

Dr. Mungee relates these findings to the impact of smoking on the heart.

"We have learned our lessons from the impact of smoking in cardiovascular health. Cannabis and alkaloids have potentially the same harmful effect, if not more, compared to, let's say smoking," he says.

The AHA advises that cannabis use should be discussed in detail with a health care professional so that any potential health risks can be reviewed. Dr. Mungee says that, in his opinion, it simply isn't a risk worth taking.

"You need to be away from the circle of those risks, because these are modifiable, this is in your hands," Dr. Mungee says. "Your genes are not. Your genetic makeup is not. If you are born into a family which has high problems related to high cholesterol and stuff, you can't change that. But this, this is in your hands. Change it now for a better future."