

Cardiac consequences: Marijuana's hidden risk

Heart-wrenching data to consider for marijuana users was recently released in two separate studies.

In the journal [JACC Advances](#), researchers found that cannabis users under 50 were in grave risk of severe cardiovascular events, even though these participants were relatively healthy individuals.

This is on par with what Michael Grzeskowiak, MD, a cardiologist with OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute, has seen in recent years. Dr. Grzeskowiak says he's seen more young people having heart attacks.

"They found that those that use marijuana had a six-time increase of heart attack. They had a four-time increased risk of stroke, and in general, they had a three-time increased risk of dying from heart attack, stroke or any cardiovascular disease," Dr. Grzeskowiak says.

To add to the startling news, [JAMA Cardiology](#) released findings at the [American College of Cardiology's Annual Scientific Session](#) that chronic marijuana smoking and THC-edible use is associated with endothelial dysfunction. This means the cells in the endothelium, the thin layer of cells inside our blood vessels, don't work properly. In turn, this can block blood flow to your heart, causing a heart attack.

This meta-analysis took 12 previously published studies that collected data from over 75 million people, with an average age of 41.

Add inflammation from marijuana use to inflammation built up from ultra-processed foods, alcohol and a sedentary lifestyle; it's a recipe for disaster.

"Inflammation, in general, in our current Western diet affects us a lot. A lot of the things I see in cardiology are due to that and if we fixed a lot of things in our diet and lifestyle, heart disease would go down," Dr. Grzeskowiak says. "Unfortunately, it's been the leading cause of death for 100 years."

Outside of work, more than 25% of the U.S. population live sedentary lifestyles, according to the [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention](#) (CDC). Additionally, [roughly half](#) of the American diet is made up of ultra-processed foods.

This comes as 48 states plus Washington, D.C., have legalized marijuana for medicinal use, and 24 states allow cannabis for recreational use, and nearly 200 million people worldwide are regular marijuana users, according to a United Nations report in 2018.

"It's concerning. A lot of people have the perception that marijuana is safe. It's natural and it's being legalized in many states for either recreational or medicinal use," Dr. Grzeskowiak says. "The common perception is that marijuana is better than tobacco and alcohol and is safer. But more studies are coming out that are making us take a pause on that thought and show that maybe there are some risks involved."

With this clear data on the risks that marijuana use brings, it adds another important topic for doctors and patients to discuss. He encourages patients to be upfront and honest about their marijuana usage with their doctors.

For overall heart health, Dr. Grzeskowiak says it's important to make healthier choices in terms of diet, exercise and lifestyle.

He calls sodas and most juices "liquid sugar," and says if you just cut out one drink a day, in one year you'll lose up to 12 pounds.

Aside from commitments to 150 minutes of exercise per week (which is recommended by the [American Heart Association](#)), focus on the "little things." If you're on the second floor for work, take the stairs more often.

To learn about the services offered at OSF HealthCare Cardiovascular Institute, or to get in touch with the OSF cardiology team, visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#).