Marijuana and birth control pills [1]

Dear Alice,

My question is this: does smoking marijuana have the same effects as smoking cigarettes if you're on the birth control pill? Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Given a lack of research on the simultaneous use of marijuana (also frequently called weed and pot) and birth control, it's currently unclear how pot and the pill may interact or conflict with one another. However, it's known that tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), a chemical compound found in marijuana, naturally elevates blood pressure. This elevation may pose a risk for people with certain pre-existing heart conditions that might also be worsened by birth control. Additionally, when used on its own, marijuana may induce undesirable and negative health effects (more on those in a bit!). As such, if you're considering mixing marijuana and birth control pills, you may wish to speak with your health care provider beforehand to gauge and prevent potential health risks.

While research has shown that smoking tobacco or drinking alcohol while on birth control can heighten a person's risk for cardiovascular disease and stroke, there are no studies looking at the effects of smoking or eating [2] marijuana while on birth control. Due to marijuana's classification as a Schedule I drug [3], there are rigid restrictions on the types and amount of research conducted. However, even with the minimal research out there, there's no evidence to suggest that marijuana decreases the effectiveness of birth control. Beyond the risks involved with using marijuana or cigarettes at the same time as birth control, there are risks associated with using marijuana or cigarettes alone.

In the short-term, both cigarette and marijuana may cause a person to experience elevated blood pressure and heart rate. Although sporadic marijuana use hasn't been linked with negative long-term effects in young and healthy users, chronic and heavy use may lead to long-term outcomes similar to those from smoking cigarettes. These long-term effects include increased risk for stroke [4], heart attack [5], and cancer. Also, those who smoke marijuana and tobacco tend to have a lower tolerance for physical activity than non-smokers, which may decrease their physical fitness.

Beyond comparing the effects of smoking marijuana and cigarettes, you may find it helpful to consider potential effects of marijuana use on its own. With marijuana use, people might
experience a variety of health effects that they perceive as positive or negative. Some short-term effects of marijuana use may include perceived pain reduction, increased heart rate and palpitations, slower reaction times, and altered perceptions of time and space. Additionally, long-term effects may include addiction\(^6\) and difficulties with learning and memory. Furthermore, marijuana appears to have a complicated relationship with mental illnesses. Depending on the person and high, marijuana use may alleviate, exacerbate, or induce mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, paranoia, and psychosis.

Ultimately, more research is needed to understand the effects of smoking marijuana on birth control pills. You may want to pay attention to any new information or research that is released in this area as it becomes available. Kudos for asking how different substances interact with medications! If you want to learn more, you may want to check out the Birth Control Pills\(^7\) category in the Go Ask Alice! Sexual & Reproductive Health\(^8\) archives.

Alice!
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