



Understanding Marijuana: A New Look at the Scientific Evidence

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Marijuana is the world's most popular illicit drug, with hundreds of millions of regular users worldwide. One in three Americans has smoked pot at least once. The Drug Enforcement Agency estimates that Americans smoke five million pounds of marijuana each year. And yet marijuana remains largely misunderstood by both its advocates and its detractors.

To some, marijuana is an insidious "stepping-stone" drug, enticing the inexperienced and paving the way to the inevitable abuse of harder drugs. To others, medical marijuana is an organic means of easing the discomfort or stimulating the appetite of the gravely ill. Others still view marijuana, like alcohol, as a largely harmless indulgence, dangerous only when used immoderately. All sides of the debate have appropriated the scientific evidence on marijuana to satisfy their claims. What then are we to make of these conflicting portrayals of a drug with historical origins dating back to 8,000 B.C.?

Understanding Marijuana examines the biological, psychological, and societal impact of this controversial substance. What are the effects, for mind and body, of long-term use? Are smokers of marijuana more likely than non-users to abuse cocaine and heroine? What effect has the increasing potency of marijuana in recent years had on users and on use? Does our current legal policy toward marijuana make sense? Earleywine separates science from opinion to show how marijuana defies easy dichotomies. Tracing the medical and political debates surrounding marijuana in a balanced, objective fashion, this book will be the definitive primer on our most controversial and widely used illicit substance.

Understanding Marijuana: A New Look at the Scientific Evidence Details

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Alexis says

This year's reading theme= drugs. Seriously, I hadn't noticed that I was reading a ton of books about drugs, but after it was pointed out to me, I decided to embrace it. Anyway, I picked up this one because it was listed in "The Chemical Carousel."

This book continues the theme that we don't actually know that much about marijuana, even though it has been used for over 3,000 years. Some sections of this book are quite interesting and some of the myths about marijuana are completely false. Very few people who use it go on to try other drugs. One third of Americans have tried it. There's one particular side effect that has occurred with one strain of cannabis that causes men to believe that their penis has retracted into their bodies. This effect seems largely to have happened in South East or South Asia and it's called "Koro".

Marijuana research is not considered sexy, which means that research on the medicinal uses have not been conducted. Research on long term effects has not been conducted, as there are many legal and ethical issues around researching marijuana. Those with migraines- Take NOTE- Marijuana has been shown to be beneficial!

Some parts of this book were really interesting, like the bits on perception, social effects, history of medicinal, recreational use and spiritual use, but other parts were just listing of studies, which got kind of repetitive and dull. The author does a really good job of summing up the main points of each chapter. I admit to skimming one or two chapters, because I didn't find them that interesting.

The US drug law chapter was one I skimmed. US drug laws and tests are really weird to me.

Basically, this book just reinforced the idea that we know very little about this drug, which is the world's most popular illicit drug, and the most commonly consumed drug after caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.

I now feel that I understand my neighbourhood better. Seriously, there are days when you can get a contact high just walking around my hood in summertime.

Jeff says

Even in its objectivity this book compels the conclusion that our marijuana laws are asinine and that common anti-pot mantras are bogus propaganda -- but what else could you expect from any meaningful investigation of the subject?

While this won't really present new information for any of the converted, it still warrants reading. It would also make a good holiday gift for any legislatures on your list.

Nick Black says

Amazon 2008-10-20. I was about to dismiss this as faddy or at best obsolete claptrap, but I must say the combination of pubdate 2002 and pub Oxford University Press swayed me...who am I to deny the Authority of Heralded Names heh? We'll see how this goes...

huzzah for pot! huzzah for science! huzzah for evidence! =]

William Flow says

Good but not great nothing new learned

Jeffrey Cavanaugh says

A rather exhausting examination of all the scientific information on marijuana in all its details; from biochemical, physiological effects to public policy. Quite frankly, after reading this one can only call marijuana prohibition not just a terrible, terrible public policy, but quite possibly an evil one as well. Prohibition makes absolutely no sense, destroys lives, increases crime, denies relief to those who are sick and in pain, and benefits only those with a pathological need to impose their moral values on others or make their career in law-enforcement. In short, the only rational opinion is that prohibition is not just stupid, it's evil and those who support prohibition are either one, the other, or both.

David says

It's rare that I read a book so honest and rational such as Mitch Earleywine's *Understanding Marijuana: A New Look at the Scientific Evidence*. The book reads like a very well-structured thesis, and is supported by a plethora of research. Earleywine has clearly done his work for this one. Just to give you an idea of what to expect, here is a sample passage (taken from a chapter titled "Social Problems"):

"Prohibitionists suggest that marijuana creates meaningful social problems, including amotivational syndrome, reckless driving, and aggression. Research in each of these domains reveals that these concerns are unfounded. Evidence for a marijuana-induced amotivational syndrome is lacking. A subset of depressed users may have inspired a few case studies that report apathy, indifference, and dysphoria, but cannabis likely does not cause these symptoms. The drug does not correlate with grades in college students. High school students who use marijuana have lower grades, but their poor school performance occurred prior to their consumption of cannabis. Cannabis users do not show worse performance on the job, more frequent unemployment, or lower wages. In addition, long-term exposure to cannabis in the laboratory fails to show any meaningful or consistent impact on productivity."

Earleywine follows this up with a conclusion about the other two common social problems that prohibitionists cite (reckless driving and aggression). He concludes the chapter by stating, "Concerns about people's productivity, impaired driving, and hostility are certainly important, but altering marijuana consumption will likely have little impact on these social problems."

I found this book to be chock full of worthy information. Earleywine does a sufficient job of presenting his data without personal bias. There are many sections in which he presents both the pro- and anti-prohibitionist viewpoints. As one review on the back cover says, the book is "A well-balanced, up-to-date, non-specialist book that should appeal to a wide audience." (Raphael Mechoulam, in *Nature*).

While reading this book, I thought about a lot of the people I know who desperately need an update on the current studies on cannabis. These people include college students, family members, co-workers, users and non-users. Everyone could benefit by reading a chapter or two. While the book does an excellent job of presenting information accurately, it may be tough reading for those with little interest in the subject.

5 stars. 328 pages. Published in 2002.

Elohim says

lol read it

Joan says

A bit dry but very objective.

Craig says

Very well-researched and fairly presented but... boooorrrrinnng

Matt says

Cannabis is a highly-misunderstood plant. I had no idea. What an enlightening book. After reading this book, I fully support regulated medical cannabis for those with pain or other medical conditions. It is without doubt a very useful herb for medicine and many many other uses. It is a shame how Kafka-esque its regulation has become. Truly shameful and wasteful and I am ashamed of our nation's track record on this account.

Dan says

This reads like a text book, so don't expect to be entertained. But it does have a wealth of information and is presented by an expert in the field that appears to be fair minded about the subject.

Mitch Earleywine is an "Associate Professor of Clinical Science in Psychology at the University of Southern California. He has received ten teaching awards for his courses on drugs and human behavior and is a leading researcher in psychology and addictions."

Some interesting quotes from the book:

The complete "Conclusions" section for the chapter "Marijuana's Health Effects", p. 164-165:

"A great deal of research addresses the role of cannabis on health. Marijuana does not appear to have a toxic dose. The drug can exacerbate symptoms of some mental illnesses, particularly psychotic disorders like schizophrenia. Yet it does not appear to cause these mental health problems. Cannabis's impact on brain structure is minimal. Nevertheless, sensitive measures of brain function reveal subtle changes associated with years of regular use. Respiratory symptoms like bronchitis and wheezing appear more often in chronic cannabis users; they also show changes in bronchial cells comparable to those seen in early stages of lung cancer. High doses of cannabinoids can alter sperm production and reproductive hormones, but these effects are temporary. The impact of THC and cannabis smoke on immune function may require further investigation, but data have yet to show that smoking marijuana increases the rates of infectious disease.

"These results confirm that marijuana is neither completely harmless nor tragically toxic. Compared to other drugs that are currently legal, its impact on health is minimal. People with psychotic disorders should probably avoid cannabis. Chronic daily use obviously creates potential problems for the quick performance of complex tasks. Smoking every day undoubtedly taxes the lungs. Men attempting to impregnate women may have more luck if they abstain from cannabis. Pregnant women should probably avoid all drugs. Nevertheless, occasional use by healthy adults does not appear to create dramatic mental or physical illness. Cannabis seems to have fewer negative health effects than legal drugs, like alcohol, caffeine, or tobacco, and kills far fewer people."

From the "Conclusions" section for the chapter "Stepping-Stones, Gateways, and the Prevention of Drug Problems", p. 63:

"There is no evidence that cannabis creates physiological changes that increase the desire for drugs. The idea that marijuana causes subsequent drug use also appears unfounded."

From the chapter "Cannabis Pharmacology", p. 135-136:

"Popular authors often misinterpret THC's long half-life by frequently implying that intoxication or some sort of residual effect of the drug remains for weeks at a time. Yet intoxication dissipates in a couple of hours. The amount of THC released gradually from fat cells does not create any subjective, cognitive, or emotional effects but may register on drug tests. Thus, a person may test positive for cannabis even a week or two after smoking, when all signs of intoxication have clearly terminated."

From the chapter "Final Thoughts", p. 271-273:

"A great deal of the available information on marijuana appears in this book. But the marijuana literature is extensive. It does not lend itself to easy summaries or interpretations. As mentioned in the preface, any attempt to explain this research may say more about the explainer than the explained. People who claim to be rational often gather information before forming opinions and making decisions. Others form opinions, make decisions, and then go in search of reasons afterward. A selective reading of this research can buttress nearly any argument for or against the drug. A careful reading, however, reveals several consistent themes.

"...Cannabis is the most popular illicit drug in the world. Hundreds of millions of people have tried it. Only a small fraction of them develop problems with other illicit drugs. Less than one-tenth of the people who ever try marijuana end up using it regularly. Fewer still develop troubles with it. Some fix the problems on their own. Many respond well to therapy. Current treatments are promising, but not perfect.

"A few facts about marijuana intoxication also seem clear...varies dramatically from person to person...Some people feel more relaxed, happy, and alive. Others feel paranoid and anxious...They eat more and crave sweets. Intoxicated people do not learn new material well. They cannot solve complex problems quickly, and their brain waves change. They can drive a car as well as the un intoxicated, but these consistent results are so counter intuitive that most people find them unbelievable. Individuals are no more aggressive after smoking marijuana. Intoxication usually lasts a couple of hours, depending on dosage. After it ends, there is little hangover or residual effect.

"Several points about chronic use are also evident. After years of daily smoking, people do not show any changes in brain structure, unless they started using the drug before adulthood. They also rarely show deficits on standard measures of intelligence, thinking, or ability. Yet sensitive tests show changes in brain function. Chronic users can perform more poorly on complex, difficult tasks that require fast reactions and focused attention. The practical implications of these findings continue to generate debate. Studies show chronic users have yet to reveal dramatic health problems, but their lungs show changes that suggest an increased risk for cancer. Chronic users do not show a consistent, identifiable, amotivational syndrome. Yet people who are high all the time probably do not get a great deal of work done. Compared to alcohol, cigarettes, and over-the-counter medications, occasional marijuana use causes little harm.

"[...]

"The laws may reveal unspoken attitudes about the people who want to alter consciousness. Some citizens may view people who want to change their consciousness as evil or bad. These views may become the strongest determinants of cannabis policy, particularly as news of the drug's limited harm reaches everyone."

Dave Wang says

Dry but informative. Feels more like a textbook than a nonfiction narrative.

Rue S. says

With admitted bias because he was a great teacher/mentor to me personally, I love everything Mitch Earleywine writes. You should too. If you're interested in drugs, that is ...

Jim says

I loved reading this book. After reading it, I am firmly in favor of beginning the process of legalizing MJ in all states.
