

## **The risks of cannabis to young people**

It is a startling and worrying fact that young Irish people are among the highest users of cannabis in Europe. According to [rte.ie](http://rte.ie), 28% of young Irish people have used cannabis in the past year compared to an EU average of just 17%. The study further showed that only 58% of Irish youths have never taken cannabis, the third lowest in Europe, and well below the EU average of 68% of young people who have never used cannabis. With these troubling figures in mind, it is essential that young Irish people are made aware of the risks of using cannabis.

There is a lot of evidence that reveals the risk of using cannabis because of the effects it has on people's health and wellbeing. According to one health website, cannabis affects the hippocampus, the area that regulates short-term memory. The effect of cannabis use temporarily prevents the brain from developing new memories and learning new things, which is a form of short-term memory loss. I wonder if the 42% of young people that use cannabis were aware of these risks before they used it. I believe that if there was greater publicity about the risks of cannabis, fewer young people would use it.

Another effect of cannabis use on young people is that it decreases their attention span and their level of control over their behaviour. This is because cannabis lowers dopamine levels in the brain. Research has shown that people who smoke a lot of cannabis tested positive for lower dopamine release in the region of the brain that controls attention and impulsive behaviour. People are more likely to act without thinking of the consequences of their actions when they are under the influence of cannabis. This has obvious effects on the likelihood of ending up in trouble or in difficult situations. It can lead to crime and an increased risk to personal safety.

While there are many negative effects of cannabis use, it would be unfair not to acknowledge the medicinal use of cannabis to treat conditions such as epilepsy. [Independent.ie](http://Independent.ie) reported on the story of Ava Twomey, a seven year old Irish girl who suffered from severe daily seizures as she has Dravets Syndrome. She had to live with her mother in Holland, away from her family, to get treatment as cannabis oil treatment, which prevents these seizures, was not available in Ireland as cannabis is illegal here. [Independent.ie](http://Independent.ie) quoted Ava's mother saying "Children like Ava need help. All we're asking is that Ava has some chance of a normal life. Ava has been granted a licence for medicinal cannabis and we are coming home." However, I would like to point out that there is a big difference between medicinal cannabis oil and cannabis being used illegally by young people. There is no need for people who don't suffer from six or seven seizures a day, as little Ava does, to smoke cannabis. There are simply too many dangerous side-effects.

There is a lot of talk about how in some people using drugs like cannabis can lead to more serious and harmful drug use in later life. Experimenting with cannabis might lead people to feel like it's ok to use different types of drugs which are far more concerning, such as cocaine, heroin, or to abuse prescription drugs such as Xanax or diazepam. All of these drugs have their own risks and side-effects both psychological and physical, and the fact that using cannabis might lead is worrying. The National Institute on Drug Abuse asserts that "most people who use cannabis do not go on to use 'harder' drugs," but there is no doubt that some people might take this risk.

It is clear that using cannabis has many risks for young people, and not everyone is aware of these risks and the ways in which cannabis can affect them. While there are some medical conditions that cannabis can help to treat, considering the effect of using cannabis on people's mental health, it is not worth the risk.