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Marijuana dangers escalate 10 years after legal sales in Colorado



Axios Denver



Illustration: Aida Amer/Axios

The alarm about marijuana-related disorders is getting louder as [more states legalize cannabis](#) and users tap into [high-potency products](#).

By the numbers: 18 million people — a third of users ages 18 and up — have reported symptoms related to cannabis use disorder.

- This is especially evident among 18- to 25-year-olds. A shocking 81% of the 4.5 million daily users meet the criteria for the disorder.

What they're saying: "Until we do research on the drastically transformed cannabis in all its forms, I think putting them under the umbrella of a safe, legal drug is wrong," Yasmin Hurd, a neuroscientist who has studied the issue, told the Times.

The big picture: Cannabis, which was legalized in Colorado in 2014, is now legal for recreational use in 24 states, creating a [\\$33 billion industry](#) with millions of American users, the Times found. Yet only two states — not Colorado — cap THC levels, and health experts warn that highly potent cannabis poses the greatest health risks.

- In Colorado, 51.5% of adults who use marijuana use it daily, but 15.4% understand the risks, according to a survey.
- The Biden administration, meanwhile, is [moving to ease federal restrictions](#) on marijuana usage.

Zoom in: Heavy prolonged cannabis use is increasingly leading to [cannabinoid hyperemesis syndrome](#).

- Symptoms include nausea, vomiting and severe stomach pain that can last several days, even weeks.
- In extreme cases, CHS can lead to dehydration, seizures, kidney failure and cardiac arrest, and even death.

Between the lines: CHS remains misdiagnosed and misunderstood, largely due to the lack of a specific diagnostic code for medical providers. This also makes it difficult to track cases of the condition, a barrier to building awareness.

- When he began his residency in 1990, Kennon Heard, an emergency physician at the University of Colorado Hospital in Aurora, was taught that cannabis-related issues were rarely seen.

The bottom line: Now, he keeps "seeing it over and over and over again" in the emergency room and says his hospital treats patients with the syndrome every day.

This story was written by Colorado College students Havalin Haskell, Ava McCormick and Bella Houck.

Editor's note: This story has been corrected to reflect that 51.5% of adults who use marijuana, do so daily or near daily — not that the total population of adults use marijuana daily.