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Marijuana surpasses alcohol in daily use for Americans, study finds

By Jennifer Hassan The Washington Post
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A test run of chocolate (minus the THC) is seen at SunMed Growers, one of the largest cultivators of cannabis in Maryland.

Jerry Jackson/the baltimore sun

YOUR HEALTH

Marijuana tops alcohol for daily drug use • B1

More people in the United States say they are using marijuana daily or near daily, compared with people who say they are drinking alcohol that often, according to a new study.

In 2022, about 17.7 million people reported daily or near-daily marijuana use, compared with 14.7 million people who reported drinking at the same frequency, said the report, which was based on more than four decades of data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. It was the first time the survey recorded more frequent users of cannabis than alcohol, the report added.

The research was published Wednesday in the peer-reviewed journal *Addiction*. The research window spans the years 1979 to 2022, and the 27 surveys that were analyzed involved more than 1.6 million participants during that time frame.

The study described the growth in daily or near-daily cannabis use as “striking.” While “far more people drink” than use marijuana, high-frequency drinking among Americans is less common, the report said. The 2022 survey found that the median drinker reported drinking on four to five days in a month, compared with 15 to 16 days in a month for cannabis.

The study noted that changing trends in cannabis use “parallel corresponding changes in cannabis policy, with declines during periods of greater restriction and growth during periods of policy liberalization.” It stressed, however, that this did not mean there was a causal link, as “both could have been manifestations of changes in underlying culture and attitudes.”

Thirty-eight states and Washington, D.C., have legalized medical marijuana programs, and 24 states have approved recreational cannabis use.

Last month, U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland recommended easing restrictions on marijuana — a historic shift in federal drug policy that could broaden access to the drug for medicinal use and boost cannabis industries in states where it is legal, The Washington Post reported.

Study author Jonathan Caulkins, a drug policy researcher at Carnegie Mellon University, told The Post on Thursday that the majority of marijuana users are smoking the substance but that over time, more people have been using “extract-based products” such as edibles and vapes.

“Cannabis legalization has expanded the variety of products,” Caulkins said, adding that prices have dropped as frequency of use has increased and that the products people are using are more potent.

“A lot of people are spending a substantial portion of their waking hours under the influence,” which can affect short-term memory, he said. Caulkins explained that in the past, usage of marijuana was “occasional” and something people used “at parties and on weekends.” Now, he said, using weed is more akin to cigarette smoking, forming part of a user’s daily habit.

Wednesday’s study noted that significantly more people are using cigarettes daily than smoking marijuana daily — 24.1 million compared with 17.7 million, based on the 2022 data.

The study added that marijuana is “no longer a young person’s drug” and that by 2022, people 35 and older accounted for “slightly” more days of use than those under 35.

Caulkins noted that while marijuana is “not as dangerous as opioids,” there are some health consequences, including cannabis use disorder and potential negative effects on the human brain. “There is a long list of reasons why this is not great, even if it is not deadly,” he said.

“There is a role for officials to design policies that protect public health,” Caulkins said. Those making policy decisions need to be aware that the “usage pattern does not look like it did 30 years ago” and that there has been “a big change in intensity,” he said.

Other experts say that while medical cannabis is popular in treating chronic pain and can improve short-term symptoms, much remains unknown about the potential long-term ill effects of such usage. They say cannabis is associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease and cognitive impairment, and they urge patients who decide to use medical marijuana to go to licensed retailers and to use edibles or tinctures over smoking or vaping because of the respiratory risks involved.

The study has some limitations. Its author noted that the data from the surveys it used were self-reported and that the willingness to self-report might have increased as cannabis became normalized over time. However, the “enormous change in self-reporting” still suggested that “changes in actual use have been considerable,” the study said.