

Unusual illness linked to marijuana use, study finds

By Sandee LaMotte, CNN

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SHUTTERSTOCK

A man smokes a marijuana cigarette.

(CNN) — An unusual illness is on the rise in the United States, especially in states that have legalized marijuana. Habitual users of cannabis, including teenagers, are showing up in emergency rooms complaining of severe

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Researchers followed nine of the patients over time and found symptoms went away when cannabis use was stopped but returned when it was restarted.

Oddly, over half of the 19 reported using extremely hot baths or showers to self-treat their symptoms. As more and more cases of CHS began to appear, hot bathing as a home treatment became a recurring theme.

"Patients often say, 'You know, it's always in the evening when I get this nausea, vomiting,'" Wang said. "So they tell me, 'I go take a hot shower, and it gets better, then it happens again the next night.'

"It's pretty universal for these patients to say they need a really, really hot shower, or a really hot bath, to improve their symptoms," he said.

Why hot? "That's not entirely clear," said Wang, who is also an associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora, Colorado.

Tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the main psychoactive compound in weed, has access to the body's pain receptors, so one theory is that the distracting sensation of the extreme heat interrupts the pain cycle, thus easing symptoms.

Related Article: Cannabis use may be linked with suicidal thoughts, plans and attempts in young adults, study finds

To compound the strangeness of the new disorder, THC and other cannabinoids in the marijuana plant have been used for pain relief -- paradoxically relieving nausea and vomiting in cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. However, despite the popularity of marijuana as a pain killer, [study results on its](#)

[effectiveness have been mixed.](#)

Still, why would the same compound relieve and also cause pain? Among a myriad of possibilities: dosage levels. Wang points to the ever increasing potency of THC in today's marijuana products.

"It's been well documented that the amount of THC that now comes in cannabis is increasing substantially," Wang said. "In the '90s the average was like 4% or 5%. Now in Colorado, it's anywhere from 15% to 20%."

Another mystery: Not all heavy users of weed are affected by CHS.

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Research is spotty

To fully understand, treat and prevent the new disorder, researchers need to document cases and compare symptoms. But CHS is so new that it doesn't have a medical diagnosis or insurance billing code, Wang said, making it "a moving target."

To do research, scientists look at medical records for reported cases of repetitive vomiting and compare those to marijuana usage in an area. Wang and his colleagues did just that in Colorado, where recreational marijuana was

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between 2005 and 2014.

"For some of our kids, this is their fifth ER visit in the past two months, with symptoms that they can't control," Wang said.

threatening.

And if they wait too long to come in, CHS can be life-

"Regardless of whether it's cannabis hyperemesis syndrome or another virus that makes you vomit a lot," Wang said, "if you let it go too long, you can have electrolyte disturbances, go into shock and have organ failure. CHS is no different."

Concerns for the future

Data show CHS is a national problem. Between 2005 and 2014 when only medical marijuana was legal in most states, a [2020 study](#) found nearly one in five people hospitalized for cyclical vomiting in the US reported concurrent cannabis use.

As of April, 17 states and the District of Columbia have legalized recreational marijuana for adults, while three dozen states and several territories have medical marijuana laws on the books, [according to the Pew Research Center](#).

A Pew survey found the majority of US adults (60%) say marijuana should be legal for medical and recreational use. With support like that, it's likely that even more states will legalize weed in the years to come.

When they do, Wang said he hopes people will also take into account the potential dangers of cannabis, especially for the young.

Related Article: Children are at increased risk of accidental poisoning from marijuana edibles, study finds

"In adolescents and young adults, that's where there's growing concern about habitual use and its effect on physical and mental health," Wang said.

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