Return to Marijuana Use Is Common Among Marijuana-Dependent Outpatient Treatment Clients

Nearly three-quarters (71%) of marijuana-dependent treatment clients return to marijuana use even after achieving at least two weeks of abstinence, according to a study of marijuana-dependent patients receiving outpatient treatment in two clinical trials in Vermont. Nearly one-fourth (24%) of the patients used marijuana at least once within one month following their initial two weeks of abstinence. Within three months nearly half (46%) of the dependent users had used again, and within six months nearly three-fourths (71%) of the clients had used again. Since “[t]hese lapse rates appear similar to studies of alcohol, opiate, and tobacco smoking,” the authors suggest that “[m]arijuana-dependent individuals may benefit from extended treatment or aftercare programs designed to assist individuals maintain initial gains achieved during treatment” (p. 88).

NOTES: Participants were marijuana-dependent clients who were not dependent on other substances (excluding nicotine) and who did not have active severe psychiatric or medical disorders. People with multiple drug dependencies or severe psychiatric or medical disorders may be more susceptible to relapse. The participants were primarily white males ranging in age from 18 to 55 (mean age 32.7); relapse rates may differ for women and minority users.