

Pot and Schizophrenia: A Dangerous Mix

A MIND IS A TERRIBLE THING TO SCRAMBLE.

Doctors studying schizophrenia have long warned that one of the worst things someone at risk for the disease can do is smoke marijuana, as research suggests that it can hasten the onset of the disorder. Skeptics, however, point out that because males are more likely than females both to smoke pot and to develop schizophrenia early, the apparent causal link is merely coincidence.

A new meta-analysis sought to settle the matter. Researchers at the University of New South Wales in Australia reviewed 83 studies and found that pot smokers who developed psychotic disorders did so 2.7 years earlier than nonsmokers. But the use of any illegal drug accelerated the onset of those diseases by two years, so pot's effect was only a bit worse.

The greater risk may be to people with a family history of psychosis. For them, one study found, pot sped up the onset of the disease by three years and worsened symptoms too. The explanation may lie in the brain's endocannabinoid receptors, which respond to the active chemicals in pot and play a role in dopamine regulation, possibly increasing the likelihood of psychotic episodes.