

Transcript

Bill Pollock

This is Show Me Today, The Voice of Missouri. As cannabis becomes more accepted and more widely used, especially among young people, new research is raising questions about what it's really doing to the developing brain. From increased risks of anxiety and depression to a potential link to psychosis, experts say this is not as harmless as many believe. We're joined by Dr. Rebecca Preston, clinical lead with EPC Center. That's short for Early Psychosis Care, the EPC Center. She recently presented on the connection between cannabis use, brain development, and mental health to help us better understand what parents, educators, and young adults need to know. Dr. Preston, thank you for joining us.

Dr. Rebecca Preston

Thank you for having me.

Bill Pollock

When you talk about cannabis and the developing brain, what is the biggest misconception people have right now?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

I think the biggest misconception that people have right now, especially young folks, is that cannabis is harmless because it's considered a natural substance or that it's been legalized or decriminalized. For young people, however, the issue isn't really morality or scare tactics. It's actually the timing that the substance is onboarded into their body. Cannabis can and does affect a brain that's still developing, especially in areas that are involved in memory, learning, emotions, decision-making, and impulse control.

Bill Pollock

What's actually happening in the brain during those adolescent years that makes it more vulnerable?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

So adolescence, just in general, is a period of major remodeling, not only in the brain, but also just, you know, the young person finding themselves. In terms of the brain, what it's doing is strengthening important connections. It's pruning unused connections and developing systems that are really, really important for judgment, emotional regulation,

motivation, and reward. And because those systems are still sort of under construction, substances like cannabis can have a stronger effect than they might in a adult developed brain.

Bill Pollock

A lot of people think cannabis is relatively low risk. What does the research say about its connection to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and even psychosis?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

So research links cannabis use with increased risk for depression, increased risk for social anxiety, temporary psychotic symptoms, and even longer term psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia. The risk isn't the same for everyone, and that must be stressed, but it is stronger when use starts earlier, if a young person is using cannabis more frequently, or it involves higher potency THC.

Bill Pollock

This is a sponsored segment here on Show Me Today, and we're chatting with Dr. Rebecca Preston, Clinical Lead with EPC Center, Early Psychosis Care, about the connection between cannabis use, especially in young adults and youth, One thing that stood out as I was looking at your report is how much more dangerous it is when someone starts using cannabis before the age of 15. Can you talk about that?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

Earlier use matters. Starting using cannabis before the age of 15 is especially concerning because it occurs during a highly sensitive developmental window within the brain. Recent research has found that youth who use cannabis frequently before the age of 15 and youth who use high potency cannabis before the age of 15 were more likely to need extra care for mental health concerns as they progressed into adulthood. And this includes mental health care for disorders such as depression or anxiety or psychotic disorders.

Bill Pollock

Cannabis today is different from what it was years ago. How does higher THC change the risk level?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

So today's cannabis products can contain a much higher THC level than cannabis used years ago. It's kind of like not your grandma's THC from back in the day when they're at Woodstock. And the difference is that higher THC concentrations actually increases the

intensity of intoxication or the high. Likewise, it can raise the risk of anxiety or panic or feelings of paranoia. It can increase impaired judgment in the user and likewise potentially lead to problematic cannabis use or a cannabis use disorder and psychotic-like experiences in individuals who aren't even prone to developing mental health issues later in their life. However, in adolescents or individuals with an underlying vulnerability, this increased THC level can kind of augment what is already in that individual and potentially lead to earlier onset of mental health issues and/or more severe long-term mental health issues in that young person.

Bill Pollock

Dr. Rebecca Preston, clinical lead with EPC Center, there's a phrase you use, decreased risk perception. Are young people simply not seeing this as harmful anymore? And how does this affect their behavior?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

So decreased risk perception has been sort of linked to, like I had mentioned earlier, the decriminalization or legalization of cannabis. And what it means is that young people are less likely to see cannabis as harmful. They think that when something feels normal or that it's legal, it's kind of not quite a big deal, which may lead a youth or a young adult to start using earlier, use more frequently, or even choose stronger products. And this matter is because early and frequent use is exactly where that risk increases for that young person.

Bill Pollock

Dr. Preston, you mentioned that in your presentation that cannabis can trigger short-term psychotic symptoms in some users. What does that look like in real life?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

So in real life, it can actually look like paranoia. It can, appear like the individual who's under the influence of seeing or hearing things that aren't there, so they may be having hallucinations. They may experience a feeling of detachment from reality. They may experience extreme fear or confusion or believe that something is happening that isn't, so sort of a little bit of a delusion. Sometimes and more often than not, these symptoms do pass as the drug wears off. But regardless, those symptoms and behaviors should always be taken seriously, especially if they're intense, repeated, or in some individuals continue after acute intoxication or use stops for that person.

Bill Pollock

Is there a connection between cannabis use and longer-term mental health outcomes? What are you seeing down the road for regular users.

Dr. Rebecca Preston

So in general, over time, regular adolescent cannabis use is associated with higher risk for mental health problems, the potential for developing a substance use disorder. It's linked to academic difficulties in a lot of youth and young adults. And again, these are general statements. It's not a causation if-then for every youth and young adult. And it is associated with later psychotic or mood disorders. So that would be an anxiety disorder or disorder that's linked to depression. And in fact, a large 2026 study found that adolescent cannabis users and cannabis use was associated with later diagnosis of psychotic disorders, bipolar disorder, anxiety, and depressive disorders in individuals who were using.

Bill Pollock

Dr. Rebecca Preston, Clinical Lead with EPC Center Early Psychosis Care. For parents listening right now, what are warning signs that cannabis use might be impacting their child's mental health? And if someone takes just one step after hearing this, what would you suggest?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

So in general, parents should watch out for changes in mood, any increased anxiety relative to a typical behavior of that young person. Any significant changes in motivation, sleep, school performance, any changes in friend group, if the young person is a little bit more secretive than a typical adolescent behavior would warrant. Increased irritability, which I know is a challenge working with youth and young adults because you never know what you're going to get if they're irritable. If there is an increase in paranoia or any kind of unusual thoughts or perceptions that the young person may be talking about. So that's what parents should kind of be on the lookout for and know that these symptoms don't occur in isolation. So if you're starting to see them in clusters, that would be sort of when you would want to start a calm and non-judgmental conversation early with the young person. Ask what the young person knows, what they're seeing among their peers, if this is typical behavior for the peer group, and whether or not they have, in fact, used cannabis. And then, if necessary, connect the young person with support if there are concerns.

Bill Pollock

I'm gonna have you give out the website here in a minute. If you know a youth or a young adult experiencing signs and symptoms associated with early psychosis, there are

specialized coordinated specialty care teams, CSE teams, in Missouri that provide evidence-based, recovery-oriented services. In Missouri, there's four programs. The Independence Center in St. Louis City, Compass Health Network has two teams, one in Wentzville, the other in Odessa, and University Health in Kansas City. Dr. Preston, if someone wants additional information, is there a website they can visit for Early Psychosis Care Center?

Dr. Rebecca Preston

Absolutely. The Early Psychosis Care Center has a website. It is epcmissouri.org. And on that website are a number of resources for young people, for families, for first responders, clinicians, in addition to a Contact Us section of the website that, you know, if anybody has any questions, they're more than welcome to reach out to us and we'll be able to kind of connect them with resources and care that they are asking for.

Bill Pollock

Dr. Rebecca Preston, Clinical Lead with EPC Center, thank you for sharing your findings and your presentation and great information. Thank you.

Dr. Rebecca Preston

Thank you for having me.

Bill Pollock

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