How big a problem does marijuana pose to the heart?

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Q Dear Counsellor, How big a problem does marijuana pose to the heart? You once said that it can cause heart disease, but is the risk that big? Does it apply to all forms of cannabis? Since marijuana is a medicinal herb, doesn't this make the risk very minimal? I am addicted to smoking marijuana, but sometimes I boil the leaves and drink the water, which I think is safer.

Sempa, Lugazi

A Dear Sempa,
While marijuana is known to have some very important health benefits, it is more likely to cause heart problems than treat or prevent them. A study published this year revealed that cannabis use may not only cause, but also double the risk of dying from heart disease. It can also increase the risk of stroke by 20%.

Previous studies showed that cannabis use can cause cardiovascular problems, but the degree to which it posed such a risk was not clear. In this study however, researchers at the University of Toulouse in France revealed heightened risks for cannabis use: 29% higher for acute coronary syndrome; 20% higher for stroke; and a doubling in the risk of dying from cardiovascular disease.



A man having a heart ache. Cannabis use may double the risk of dying from heart disease

These findings were published this year in the journal, *Heart*.

A linked editorial, by Prof. Stanton Glantz and Dr Lynn Silver of the University of California at San Francisco, observed that, the analysis "raises serious questions about the assumption that cannabis imposes little cardiovascular risk".

The researchers, however, pointed out that, more research is needed to prove whether cardiovascular risks are only associated with inhaled products or also to other forms of cannabis exposure. They argued that this is important because cannabis is now generally more potent and has diversified into many different forms of inhaled high potency cannabis concentrates, synthetic psychoactive cannabinoids and edibles: "How these changes affect cardiovascular risk requires clarification, as does the proportion of risk attributable to cannabinoids themselves versus particulate matter, terpenes or other components of the exposure," they revealed.

They went a step further and recommended that, cannabis should be treated like tobacco: Not criminalised, but discouraged, with protection of bystanders from second-hand exposure.