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Public Health Advisory on Human Use of Products Derived from Cannabis, Including Marijuana and Hemp

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The Arkansas Department of Health, along with Arkansas Surgeon General Dr. Greg Bledsoe and Arkansas Drug Director Kirk Lane, urge Arkansans to have heightened awareness about the use of products derived from Cannabis, including marijuana and hemp, and the risks of harm associated with such products claiming to benefit health.

1. Marijuana is addictive. Approximately one in eleven individuals who use marijuana will become addicted. The risk is greater in youth. One in six teenagers who use marijuana will become addicted, and the risk for developing a marijuana substance use disorder further increases for those who use marijuana frequently.¹

In 2018 so far, for all Department of Human Services licensed facilities' intake forms, marijuana was listed as a substance used 40% of the time, almost 1.5 times more than cocaine, crack cocaine, heroin, and other opiates and synthetics combined.²

2. Today's marijuana is more potent than before. Tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, is the primary psychoactive substance found in Cannabis. Analysis of samples confiscated by the United States Drug Enforcement Administration showed a three-fold increase from approximately four percent THC in 1995 to approximately 12 percent THC in 2014.³

Marijuana products can now be found with THC concentrations exceeding 20 percent.⁴ The long-term health or developmental consequences of exposure to these high concentrations of THC are unknown.

3. Marijuana use is associated with a number of adverse health outcomes. A comprehensive review by the National Academies in 2017 found that marijuana use is associated with the development of psychoses (like schizophrenia) and an increased risk of motor vehicle crashes.⁵
4. Marijuana is particularly harmful to the developing child. Smoking marijuana during pregnancy is associated with being born at low birth weight, which is a risk factor for death in the first year of life. In a September 2018 clinical report, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that "marijuana should not be used during pregnancy."⁶

In 2017, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry warned that marijuana impacts the developing brain, even beyond early childhood. They note that "heavy use during adolescence is associated with increased incidence and worsened course of psychotic, mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders." They also cite longer-term complications of marijuana

use, including “increased risk of motor vehicle accidents, sexual victimization, academic failure, lasting decline in intelligence measures, psychopathology, addiction, and psychosocial and occupational impairment.”⁷

5. There are a limited number of conditions where the medical literature shows substantial or conclusive evidence for using Cannabis-derived medications^{5,8,9,16}:
 - a. nausea and vomiting resulting from chemotherapy,
 - b. spasticity in patients with multiple sclerosis,
 - c. chronic neuropathic pain, and
 - d. certain seizure disorders.

Outside of these conditions, there is not sufficient evidence to show that any forms of Cannabis, including marijuana and hemp, are safe and effective as medications.

6. FDA-approved medications that are derived from Cannabis are already available to Arkansans and available by prescription for patients under the care of a health care provider. These include:
 - a. Cannabidiol (Epidiolex®)¹⁰
 - b. Dronabinol (Marinol® and Syndros®)¹¹
 - c. Nabilone (Cesamet®)¹²
7. The FDA works to ensure that medications are safe and effective. Even medications that have gone through an FDA approval process and are manufactured at pharmaceutical grade can have risk associated with their use, but the testing and approval process allows those risks to be known. This allows healthcare professionals to talk with patients about the risks and benefits of a particular medication. The safety and efficacy of untested, non-FDA approved products remain unknown.
8. Marijuana impairs judgment and can lead to actions that result in death. These include motor vehicle crashes, falls, and other deaths including those resulting from actions performed with impaired judgment. While marijuana may not directly result in death in the same way as other drugs, there are unfortunately many instances where marijuana intoxication has led to death.^{5,13,14}
9. A new analysis of more than 100 studies on the use of Cannabis and cannabinoids for treating people with chronic non-cancer pain found high rates of adverse events associated with the treatment (81.2 percent) while less than a third of patients (29 percent) reported a 30 percent reduction in their pain as a result of the treatment. Researchers concluded, “*It seems unlikely that cannabinoids are highly effective medicines for chronic non-cancer pain.*”¹⁵
10. In June 2018, the FDA announced it approved Epidiolex for the treatment of seizures associated with two rare and severe forms of epilepsy, Lennox-Gastaut syndrome and Dravet syndrome, in patients two years of age and older. In September 2018, The Department of Justice and Drug Enforcement Administration placed Epidiolex in schedule V of the Controlled Substances Act. Epidiolex contains cannabidiol (CBD) extracted from the cannabis plant and is the first FDA-approved drug to contain a purified extract from the plant.¹⁶
11. The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 passed by Congress in December 2018 legalizes the production of hemp. However, this law preserves the Food and Drug Administration’s authority to regulate products containing Cannabis or Cannabis-derived compounds. This allows the FDA to continue enforcing the law to protect patients and the public while providing potential regulatory pathways for products containing Cannabis and Cannabis-derived compounds. The FDA requires a Cannabis product (hemp-derived or otherwise) that is marketed with a claim of

therapeutic benefit, or with any other disease claim, to be approved by the FDA for its intended use before it may be introduced into interstate commerce.¹⁷

12. Due to a lack of regulations on products containing cannabidiol (CBD), consumers cannot be certain what they will receive if purchasing a product purported to contain CBD. A 2017 study found only 26 of 84 samples of cannabidiol oils, tinctures and liquids purchased online contained the amount of CBD claimed on their labels.¹⁸

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