Factors associated with variability and stability of cannabis use in young adulthood

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Introduction

The literature on cannabis use is dominated by research that has focused on early-life and adolescent risk factors. Few longitudinal studies have investigated factors in emerging adulthood which are associated with patterns of cannabis use after the peak period of experimentation. This is important research as prevention programs are increasingly taking a developmental approach which recognises that opportunities to influence cannabis use pathways emerge throughout the life-course.

Aim

To identify and compare the most important factors in young adulthood associated with initiating cannabis use, reverting to cannabis use and remaining a cannabis user.

Method

Data from two successive waves of the Path Through Life Study (PATH) were analysed (n=2,009). The longitudinal design enabled change in cannabis use in young adulthood (mean age 27 years) to be predicted based on factors assessed approximately four years prior (mean age 23 years).

At mean age 23 and 27 years, individuals were classified as: non-users (no lifetime cannabis use), former users (no cannabis use in the past 12 months), occasional users (cannabis use once a month or less in the past 12 months) and regular users (weekly or more frequent cannabis use). Eight patterns of cannabis use were identified (Table 1). Fourteen theoretically important factors associated with cannabis use were assessed at mean age 23 years.

Multivariable analyses determined the most important factors associated with each pattern of cannabis use. The odds ratio (OR) and 95% confidence interval (95%CI) were reported.

Results

Sample characteristics

Half the sample were male (47%), the majority were Caucasian (93%) and most had completed secondary school (92%). The mean age was 22.6 years (SD=1.50, range 20-26). One-third (30%) were tobacco smokers and 42% were heavy drinkers. One-fifth (20%) of lifetime cannabis users first used before age 16 years.

Pattern of cannabis use at age 23 years by age 27 years

Eight patterns of cannabis use were identified (Table 2).

Adjusted association of factors with pattern of cannabis use in young adulthood

Multivariable analyses which adjusted for age, gender, ethnicity and schooling found (Table 3):

1. An environment of licit drug use was strongly associated with initiation of cannabis use and reverting to use in young adulthood.
2. Negative interactions with friends increased vulnerability to cannabis use and contributed to persistent use.
3. Greater fun seeking was found to orientate people towards initiating cannabis but was not significantly associated with reverting to use or remaining a user in young adulthood.
4. Higher psychosocial increased the likelihood of continuing with cannabis use.
5. The close connection between early cannabis use in adolescence and persistent heavy use in young adulthood was confirmed.
6. Religious involvement was found to be protective of cannabis initiation.

Conclusion

The assessment of heavy alcohol use, tobacco use, interactions with peers, dimensions of personality and gender are important in identifying young adults at increased risk of initiating cannabis use, reverting to use and persisting with use (Figure 1).

Considerably more factors were significantly associated with initiation than with other patterns of cannabis use in young adulthood which suggest that early intervention is likely to provide the greatest opportunity to prevent ongoing problematic cannabis use in young adulthood. Findings support broad-based cannabis interventions for young adults that include multi-substance and personality targeted strategies, conflict resolution skills and the promotion of health enhancing values.

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References