

# Clearing the Smoke: Real Costs of Legal Pot

Colorado merchants started selling what's known as recreational marijuana Jan. 1, and already the variety of new merchandise is mind-blowing.

There are different kinds of strains, each with its own smell and unique characteristics, including:

- Vaporizers that look and feel like social media gadgets.
- Marijuana drinks and foods—everything from gummy candies to so-called oatmeal sandwiches.

Colorado in many ways is still in the honeymoon phase of recreational marijuana legalization. People are caught up in the excitement of new products and growth, and many are looking forward to extra revenue.

Gov. John Hickenlooper expects more than \$100 million from recreational and medical marijuana taxes and fees in the first fiscal year.

## Skeptics Sound Alarm

But many health and youth advocates, like Bob Doyle, are tempering the initial enthusiasm.

Doyle has worked for years in tobacco education as executive director of the Colorado Tobacco Education and Prevention Alliance.

Now, he is speaking out against the dangers of marijuana as a member of Smart Approaches to Marijuana, an advocacy group that seeks to decrease use.

"We know what's coming. If we don't stop it, this is the birth of the next tobacco industry," Doyle told CBN News.

"It's going to be like the birth of every other drug where the societal costs are much bigger than what any community is going to make on this," he warned.

The costs include marijuana addiction.

Treatment specialists say they're inundated with requests, and student use is quickly rising. Experts believe the legalization of medical marijuana several years ago is the reason.

Several surveys show that twice as many Denver 8th graders use pot, compared to 8th graders nationally. Almost one-third of Denver high school seniors consume the drug.

"Legalizing it creates more promotion, creates greater access to the drug and also legitimizes the drug," Doyle said.

Vaporizers are one of the products Doyle is most concerned about.

"*Rolling Stone* magazine called them the 'iPod of getting baked,'" he noted. "So it's a high-tech device to get really, really high."

It's also a concealer, in many cases looking just like an e-cigarette.

### **False Sense of Security**

Youth advocates say marijuana edibles pose another danger: They attract young people by marketing a wholesome, healthy image.

Jo McGuire is director of Compliance and Corporate Training for Conspire, a drug-testing company in Colorado Springs. She said many kids are simply not concerned about pot.

"They say, 'It's good for us. It's medicine. It's healthy,' " she explained.

McGuire said parents often contribute to a false sense of security, not realizing that today's marijuana is much more potent than the drug of their day.

"One time we heard a dad say, 'Well, they're just going to sleep all the time and have munchies. What's the big deal?' " McGuire recalled.

"Well, we're seeing withdrawal signs of anger and rage and real withdrawal when they can't have their product," she said.

Chris Harms is director of Colorado's School Safety Resource Center, a state agency that provides training to schools on a variety of issues, including substance abuse.

"I think schools are very concerned about students coming to school under the influence [of marijuana]," she told CBN News.

### **Educating Parents, Kids**

Harms is encouraging Colorado parents to teach their children about the dangers of pot. She also has a message for other states that envy Colorado's seeming financial windfall.

"People may see the tax money that's being generated but not all the hidden costs of marijuana," she said. "We don't know, for instance, how many substance abuse centers we're going to need."

Legalization supporters say they also believe in educating kids about the dangers of pot. However, they believe that legalization is the best way to limit their access.

CBN News spoke with Mason Tvert last year before he became a national spokesperson for the Marijuana Policy Project.

"We know that alcohol prohibition failed and caused more problems than it solved," he said.

“So, we’re in a similar situation with marijuana where we need to do everything we can to keep it away from young people and that includes regulating it, controlling it and taxing it,” he added.

### **Possible Ramifications**

It will be years before the smoke clears and the full effects of legalization are understood.

Financial experts say taxes will fluctuate as other states join Colorado and the marketplace experiments with pricing, products, and developing efficiencies.

Questions also remain about how much addiction rates will grow, what it will mean for education and for creating a competitive work force.

In the meantime, McGuire is beefing up her staff after a recent spike in positive tests for pot.

And Doyle will continue to educate in the hopes of preventing the downward spirals he’s already seeing.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had the mother or father come up to me and say, ‘I had the good student, the good athlete—and they’ve been smoking marijuana and it’s no longer,” he said.

“Their motivation is gone,” he continued. “Their academics have gone down and their athletics have gone away. And it’s horrifying.”