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Heavy Marijuana Use Among Gay and Bisexual Male Emerging Adults Living With HIV/AIDS

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Marijuana use has been documented to be higher among emerging adults than among other age groups in the United States. Persons living with HIV may use marijuana as a method for alleviating symptoms and side effects associated with treatment as well as a coping or mood adjustment strategy. The authors analyzed data from a two-phase mixed methods study of young HIV-positive gay/bisexual men to explore motivations for heavy marijuana use. Phase I consisted of semistructured qualitative interviews with 54 young gay/bisexual HIV-positive men (mean age 21.0 years) conducted at four geographically and demographically diverse sites. Phase II consisted of a computer-assisted quantitative survey administered to 200 young gay/bisexual HIV-positive men (mean age 21.0 years) conducted at four geographically and demographically diverse sites.
Marijuana and Gay and Bisexual Emerging Adults

For young persons living with HIV/AIDS, the period of emerging adulthood may present unique challenges and stressors. Emerging adulthood, the developmental period between the ages of 18 to 25, is characterized by identity exploration, instability in terms of residence and work, and the possibility of change (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Such explorations of possible life directions often coincide with a peak in drug and alcohol use (Arnett, 2005) as youth work to develop their integrated adult identities. In addition to the processes of exploring various social identities that are characteristic of the period, adjusting to living with HIV/AIDS may involve risk and resilience/factors that interact to impact an adolescent’s adaptation to his/her chronic illness (Wallander & Varni, 1992, 1998). Several studies report marijuana to be used by adults living with HIV/AIDS to alleviate stress, symptoms, and side effects associated with antiretroviral therapy (Abrams et al., 2007; Furler, Einarson, Millson, Walmsley, & Bendayan, 2004; Ware, Rueda, Singer, & Kilby, 2003). Very little is known as to how and the extent to which emerging adults may use marijuana to adjust to living with HIV/AIDS.

Longitudinal panel data have shown that daily marijuana use is higher among emerging adults than the rest of the population, with 4% to 6% of emerging and young adults (18 to 30 years old) reporting daily use and...