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Original article

## Changes in cannabis use in emerging adulthood: The influence of peer network, impulsivity, anxiety and depression



### Maintien ou cessation de consommation de cannabis chez les jeunes adultes : influence du réseau de pairs, de l'impulsivité, de l'anxiété et de la dépression

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** – Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug with the highest prevalence reported among 15- to 24-year-olds. This specific period of emerging adulthood constitutes a critical age for substance use and for future consumption. Cannabis use patterns change during college or university and the post-college transition; users are at greater risk of adverse health outcomes (especially if they start or maintain a pattern of frequent use).

**Objectives.** – The overall aim of this study was to highlight psychological and relational factors that might be associated with changes (including cessation and fluctuation) in cannabis use during this specific period, separately for males and females.

**Methods.** – The subjects were 682 first-year college students (69.94% of female), aged between 18 and 25 years ( $M = 18.59$  years,  $SD = 1.56$ ). Four groups were formed according to cannabis consumption: “non-users” (54.64%), “desisting users” (14.04%), “fluctuating users” (16.23%), and “persistent users” (15.07%). A self-report questionnaire was administered to evaluate prevalence, frequency and trajectory of use, number of peer cannabis users, alcohol use, impulsivity, anxiety (trait and social) and depression.

**Results.** – Females appear more sensitive to the romantic partner's consumption than males. For both sexes, having more friends who use cannabis appears to be a determinant. Depression and anxiety were not related to changes in cannabis use. Impulsivity is a significant factor for the maintenance of cannabis use in emerging adulthood, with higher lack of premeditation for males and higher sensation seeking for females among fluctuating and persistent users.

**Conclusions.** – Results are discussed in terms of maintenance of use and the spiral of consumption, including clinical implications for prevention and interventions.

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## R É S U M É

**Introduction.** – Le cannabis est la drogue illicite la plus consommée, avec des taux de prévalence les plus élevés parmi les jeunes de 15 à 24 ans. L'entrée à l'âge adulte semble être un âge critique pour la consommation de substance. À cette période de transition scolaire et statutaire, des changements dans les patterns de consommation peuvent s'observer, en termes d'initiation, de maintien et de cessation. Les consommateurs présentent également un plus grand risque au niveau de leur santé surtout s'ils ont eu une consommation fréquente et/ou problématique.

**Objectifs.** – L'objectif de cette étude vise à mettre en lumière les facteurs psychologiques et relationnels pouvant être associés aux changements de consommation de cannabis (y compris la cessation et les fluctuations) à cette période de transition, en considérant les garçons et filles séparément.

**Méthode.** – L'échantillon est composé de 682 étudiants en première année universitaire, (69,94 % de filles), âgés entre 18 et 25 ans (moyenne = 18,59 ans, écart-type = 1,56). Quatre sous-groupes ont été formés selon

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leur trajectoire de consommation : les non-consommateurs, (54,64 %), « les consommateurs désistants » (14,04 %), « les consommateurs fluctuants » (16,23 %), et « les consommateurs persistants » (15,07 %). Un questionnaire d'auto-déclaration a été administré pour évaluer la prévalence, la fréquence et la trajectoire de consommation de cannabis, la consommation d'alcool, le nombre de pairs consommateurs de cannabis ainsi que l'impulsivité, l'anxiété (anxiété trait et anxiété sociale) et la dépression.

*Résultats.* – Les filles apparaissent plus sensibles à la consommation de leur partenaire. Pour les deux sexes, avoir des amis qui consomment du cannabis apparaît déterminant dans les trajectoires de consommation. La dépression et l'anxiété ne sont pas associées aux changements de consommation de cannabis, alors que l'impulsivité est un facteur significatif dans le maintien de la consommation lors de l'entrée à l'âge adulte. Plus spécifiquement, le manque de préméditation est plus important chez les garçons et la recherche de sensation est plus élevée chez les filles, notamment chez les consommateurs fluctuants et persistants.

*Conclusions.* – Les résultats sont discutés en termes de maintien de la consommation de cannabis et de spirale de la consommation activée par l'impulsivité. Les implications cliniques pour la prévention et les interventions sont également considérées.

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## 1. Introduction

Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug, with the highest prevalence reported among 15- to 24-year-olds. Although its lifetime prevalence does not appear to have increased in recent years, 29.7% of young European adults have already used this substance. Males are more likely to use cannabis than females (EMCDDA, 2012). Most people start experimenting with cannabis and alcohol during adolescence, with a peak in late adolescence and young adulthood (Schulenberg, Merline, Johnston, & O'Malley, 2005). Emerging adulthood, or post-adolescence (usually defined as the period between age 18 and age 26), is also characterized by a peak in substance-use related problems (Arnett, 2003; Schulenberg et al., 2005), such as negative impact on family and other interpersonal relationships, impaired performance, low educational aspirations, involvement in delinquency and risky sexual behavior (Bergeron, Langlois, & Cheang, 2016; Fergusson & Horwood, 2007; Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2013; Schuster et al., 2012). Frequent cannabis use during adolescence is associated with a higher risk of developing dependence (Swift, Coffey, Carlin, Degenhardt, & Patton, 2008) and other problems such as anxiety or depression (Chabrol, Ducongé, Roura, & Casas, 2004; Hayatbakhsh et al., 2007; Patton et al., 2002; Scholes-Balog, Hemphill, Patton, & Toumbourou, 2013) in early adulthood. This specific period of post-adolescence, or emerging adulthood, differs from adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2000) and seems to be a turning point in young people's developmental trajectory (Schwartz, 2016). It also constitutes a critical age for substance use and for future consumption (Derefinko et al., 2016; Fromme, Corbin, & Kruse, 2008).

Cannabis use patterns change during college or university and the post-college transition; users are at greater risk of adverse health outcomes (especially if they start or maintain a pattern of frequent use) (Caldeira et al., 2012). Heterogeneous trajectories of use exist during adolescence and emerging adulthood, differentiated by factors such as the age of initiation and the frequency and duration of use (Chassin, Flora, & King, 2004; Flory et al., 2015; Windle & Wiesner, 2004). Previous longitudinal studies highlighted several types of trajectories of use spanning adolescence and emerging adulthood. They suggest, for example, that early- and late-onset cannabis users are more dysfunctional than non-users (Flory, Lynam, Milich, Leukefeld, & Clayton, 2004); that high chronic users have higher levels of delinquency, lower academic performance, more drug-using friends, and more stressful life events than abstainers, experimental users, decrease users or increase users (Windle & Wiesner, 2004). Previous findings have also suggested that abstainers present the most favorable behavioral, socioeconomic and health outcomes, whereas early high users

have the least favorable outcomes (Ellickson, Martino & Collins, 2004). Another study showed that decreasing users and frequent users were more at risk to drop out school than non-users, and that students who use cannabis frequently are more at risk for lower achievement (Suerken et al., 2016). Moreover, trajectories of use are associated with unconventional behaviors, sensation seeking, emotional dysregulation, nicotine/alcohol dependence/abuse and partner use at later age (Brook, Zhang, Leukefeld, & Brook, 2016). Some protective factors, such as parental disapproval, non-using peers and school attachment, can support a decrease in cannabis use (Eassey, Gibson, & Krohn, 2015). All these studies focused on the negative outcomes of the divergent trajectories of cannabis use, which began in adolescence but were evaluated during emerging adulthood; however, less is known concerning fluctuations in these trajectories (e.g., attempting to stop or restarting) and the factors characterizing emerging adults after these changes. In addition, few studies have investigated the cessation, the going out or maintenance of use. Several factors have been highlighted as predictors of declining use among regular users such as a neighborhood, family and peer context that favors reduction (Pollard, Tucker, de la Haye, Green, & Kennedy, 2015). As well, cohabiting relationships and non-cohabiting dating relationships (Fleming, White & Catalano, 2010; Fleming, White, Oesterle, Haggerty, & Catalano, 2010) are associated with reduced marijuana use relative to non-dating.

Indeed, various factors can induce changes in cannabis use due to their frequent association with the substance, such as environment, individual characteristics or personal life events, and mental and physical illness. Most studies have investigated environmental factors, including the influence of peers or family. Indeed, social influence, by peers or boy/girlfriends, is frequently associated with cannabis use (Creemers et al., 2010; Leonard & Homish, 2005), and specifically with starting to use (de la Haye, Green, Kennedy, Pollard, & Tucker, 2013; Schmits, Mathys, & Quertemont, 2015a), partly because young people consume cannabis in social situations more than 75% of the time (Agrawal, Lynskey, Bucholz, Madden, & Heath, 2007; Buckner, Crosby, Silgado, Wonderlich, & Schmidt, 2012). Peer substance use as a risk factor in late adolescence is less clear. While peer-related substance use risks decrease with age (Scholte, Poelen, Willemsen, Boomsma, & Engels, 2008), some studies exploring peer influences in late adolescence suggest that peer substance use plays a role in maintaining substance use in young adulthood (Andrews, Tildesley, Hops, & Li, 2002; Shin, Chung, & Jeon, 2013). Moreover, young people often use both cannabis and alcohol (Pape, Rossow, Storvoll, & 2009). As a consequence, cannabis use is associated with problems related to alcohol use and drunkenness (Kokkevi, Nic Gabhainn, & Spyropoulou, 2006).

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