



Fort Bend County Podcasts

Podcast Episode 57 – Think THC Is Safe? Your Heart Might Disagree

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Gina: Welcome to this week's Benefit Detective Podcast. I'm Gina.

Wendy: And I'm Wendy. And let's welcome back Dr. Lu.

Dr. Lu: Hello. Thanks for having me back again.

Gina: Is it just me, or does it seem that heart attacks don't discriminate on age?

Wendy: Right. Well, at my last doctor's appointment, I read an article from the American College of Cardiology that researchers found that cannabis users younger than the age of 50 were over six times as likely to suffer a heart attack compared to a non-user.

Gina: Oh my gosh. See? So how does THC interact with the body's cardiovascular system differently than substances like nicotine?

Dr. Lu: Great question. So, we'll start with the nicotine. You know, the nicotine in cigarette smoke, it causes sympathetic neural stimulation and the release of various neurotransmitters. So it accelerates atherosclerosis and may contribute to acute coronary events. So the main thing is that nicotine is more of a stimulant effect. And part of that is it can increase risk of cardiovascular events seen with, or caused by transiently increasing the blood pressure and the heart rate and by causing coronary artery vasoconstriction. So that's basically narrowing, tightening of the arteries that supply the blood to the heart, and/or by impairing endothelial function. So the big thing about the nicotine is a stimulant. Okay?

Dr. Lu: Now THC, or marijuana, works a little differently. It does have somewhat of a stimulant effect at lower doses in some people and depending on other factors. But, in my research, it looks like it's kinda variable. Of course, it's probably more infamously or famously known for relaxing people. So it's kind of an unusual, substance in in the case that it can be both a stimulant and a relaxant. And the THC component, the tetrahydrocannabinol, is the main psychoactive agent in marijuana. And so that particular chemical impairs vascular function by harming the endothelial cells, which are the inner lining of the blood vessels. And so, and that's regardless of whether it's smoked or consumed as an edible.

Dr. Lu: So that is a little different. It's not so much a stimulant causing vasoconstriction like the nicotine. But that action on the endothelial also causes reduced blood vessel flexibility and can also cause inflammation. And so the cumulative effect that it does still increase the risk of heart attacks and cardiovascular disease, but slightly different, but still because of its effects on the blood vessels.



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Dr. Lu: And then also, studies show that both smoking and ingesting the THC disrupts the inner lining of the blood vessels. And so either way, smoking and ingesting. And, also, it affects the ability of the blood vessels to dilate, which also reduces blood flow. So, again, kind of the opposite effect of vasoconstriction. They just don't relax and open up as well, and therefore, there's less blood flow. While the chemical mechanism may differ, as I said before, but the bottom line is the damage to the blood vessels is similar to tobacco smoke. So they're both bad for you, and they both increase the risk of heart disease.

Wendy: And can marijuana use lead to a chronic bronchitis?

Dr. Lu: Yes. Definitely. It is, I mean, if you think about it, they're still somewhat similar in the kind of physical attributes. They're both dried plants that have been rolled up and smoked. Right? They're being burned, and you're inhaling that combustion smoke. Right? So that's harmful to the lungs regardless of the source. Right? Whether it's a gas fire or, you know, barbecue smoke, campfire, doesn't matter. Right? So whether it's the nicotine from a cigarette or the marijuana, either way, all smoke is bad for us and are known to have carcinogens from the combustion.

Dr. Lu: So, yes. It is still harmful and can lead to bronchitis. So the similar symptoms, you think about it, you're inhaling it, and then the inner linings of the bronchioles and the lungs are very sensitive. That's why they allow the exchange of oxygen and gas, and it's almost a direct feed into the blood system. And so if you continue to expose smoke from anything to those very sensitive, soft tissue surfaces, it will have its effect over time. Right? And so you can get, just like with chronic cigarette smokers, you can get the chronic cough, phlegm production, wheezing, all the typical symptoms of chronic bronchitis. So, yeah, it can be very similar and still lead to chronic bronchitis. And, of course, they're still doing research on that, but from what we can tell, yes.

Gina: So why do you think people believe marijuana is safer than tobacco despite evidence of lung and heart risk?

Dr. Lu: My best guess is just a lack of education and public awareness. As we're all aware, there has been a very large, very public, and long-lasting anti-smoking campaign. Right? Even from elementary school and all the way up into adult age, and everyone knows smoking is bad. They still do it anyway, but even the smokers know that smoking is bad. That's very well established. I think marijuana, partially because it was illegal until recently, there just hasn't been as much talk about it because it's illegal. You shouldn't be doing it anyway. Now it's kind of, in a sense, become similar to cigarette smoking, where, well, it's legal, but does that mean it's good and recommended? I would say no.

Dr. Lu: But I think perhaps in future years, as the medical authorities and maybe even government authorities kinda get more on board with educating the public and, again, making them aware of the harms of marijuana, then hopefully that perception of it being not as bad or maybe even safe and okay, maybe, eventually, that will fall to the wayside and people will realize that, like I said, I mean, it's still smoking. And so it has many similar bad effects as cigarette smoking.



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Wendy: Thank you, Dr. Lu, for joining us today.

Dr. Lu: Thank you so much for having me.

Gina: Well, that's a wrap for this week's Benefit Detective Podcast. I'm Gina.

Wendy: And I'm Wendy. Stay tuned for our next podcast.

Gina: And remember, the Benefit Detectives are here to help.