



# Marijuana Killed My Son! Doctors, Let Me Tell You Something About the Dangers of Cannabis

by Laura Stack

**M**arijuana, legal for recreational use in Colorado since 2012, killed my son Johnny Stack at age 19. He started using at 14, obtained from a friend's older 18-year-old brother, who had a medical marijuana card. Johnny got his own medical marijuana card at 18 years old from an unknown doctor, and he had no medical or mental conditions—he just wanted to get high with his friends. Today's marijuana, very high in THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol, the euphoria producing-addicting substance in cannabis products) is destroying the health and social structure of my state Colorado. Marijuana, whether obtained with a medical marijuana card or purchased for recreational use, could kill you, your child, your patients, and it will lay waste to the health of Missouri. As physicians and as parents, you must not let this happen. I thank your medical journal *Missouri Medicine* for this unique opportunity to address physicians directly. Let me tell you about my deceased son Johnny and the marijuana caused morass that the Centennial State is becoming.

## Colorado Goes to Pot

Colorado passed a medical marijuana law in 2000, and in 2012, Colorado was the first state to legalize recreational marijuana (HiTHCpot). Many people believe the false narrative that because marijuana is legal, it must be safe and harmless. By 2014, HiTHCpot was appearing in high schools. My son,



Laura Stack is the mother of Johnny Stack who killed himself after becoming psychotic from THC marijuana concentrates (dabs). She is the founder of Johnny's Ambassadors a non-profit organization dedicated to informing the public of the dangers of youth marijuana use and a nationally known anti-recreational marijuana activist.

Johnny, was 14 at that time. Five years later, he died by suicide after becoming psychotic from 'dabbing' HiTHCpot (no other drugs in his system). Johnny had been diagnosed with "THC abuse – severe" by a psychiatric hospital.

Devastated by his death, I formed a nonprofit, Johnny's Ambassadors ([www.johnnysambassadors.org](http://www.johnnysambassadors.org)). I began research on HiTHCpot and wrote a 300-page book with 176 scientific citations, *The Dangerous Truth About Today's Marijuana: Johnny Stack's Life and Death Story* (see sidebar). In Johnny's memory, I will go anywhere to speak with anyone who will listen about the epidemic of HiTHCpot and the misery, poor health, and death it causes.

## High THC Concentrates

Hash oil is a concentrated cannabis extract that can be smoked, vaped, eaten, or rubbed onto the skin. Hash oil products first appeared around 2010. Medical pot dispensaries began to carry early versions of known as budders, saps, and waxes (Figures 1 and 2). They weren't common in 2012 when voters legalized Colorado recreational marijuana. But by 2015, these novel high-potency waxes and extracts were being used by high schoolers. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment started tracking "dabbing" on its annual Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS). I'd never heard of concentrates and didn't know a "dab" of marijuana from a dance move. In fact, it wasn't for another two years until Johnny left for Colorado State University (CSU) that we found a HiTHCpot "Nectar Collector" in his dorm room and said, "What is this stuff?"

## Dabs and Dabbing

Have you ever heard of dabbing? No, not the hip-hop dance! "Dabs" are extracted concentrates of tetrahydrocannabinol or THC, the chemical (cannabinoid) in marijuana that makes users "high." The 2019 HKCS reported 10.2% of high school



students use dabs, and of those who admit to using marijuana, 52% report dabbing—a nearly 70% increase in only two years.

Here's how dabs are made: Cannabis flowers are run through a solvent such as butane, ethanol, or propane. The THC leaves the plant material and dissolves into the solvent. The concentrated THC solution is filtered to remove most of the solvent and dried in a tray. The result is a sticky, bronze-colored oily substance that looks like beeswax or earwax. These can be additionally processed into distillates, which are more pure THC oils and extracts. Dabs are a chemical, not a plant, and they are highly potent, containing up to 99% THC. Dabs are typically heated on a hot surface with the vapors inhaled through a dab rig or dab pen.

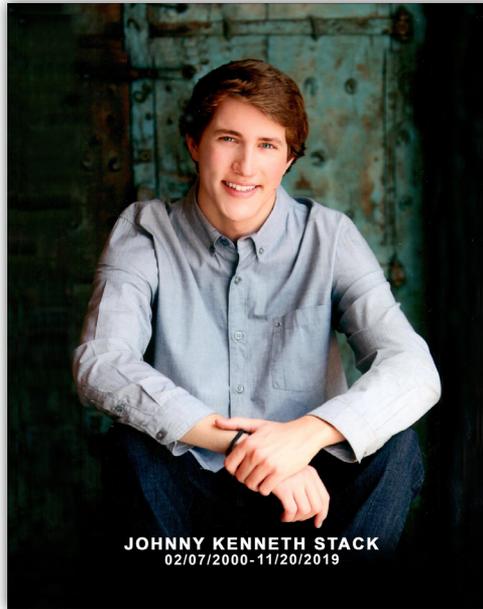
Dabs are usually called by their consistency, such as shatter, wax, budder, crumble, live resin, or pull 'n snap (Figure 1). Many advocates, usually in states like Colorado and Nevada where recreational marijuana use is legal, defend dabbing as no worse than smoking pot. But they're full of it. Dabbing carries a lot more risk for mental illness and addiction than smoking. And its levels of THC aren't regulated or restricted. Dabbing isn't the only way high-potency marijuana is delivered. There's also:

### *Smoking*

This refers to the dried flowers of the marijuana plant. In practice, it could include seeds, bits of stems, and shredded leaves as well. Users often refer to any cannabis plant matter by the catch-all terms flower, herb, bud, or grass. Until the 1990s, THC potency in herb averaged 3-5%; now, it varies between about 12-25%, depending on the cannabis strain, with an average of 15.6% in 2018.<sup>1</sup> Growers continually increase herb potency through selective breeding, and they boast strains from 30-40% THC. It's usually smoked using a pipe or a bong or rolled into a joint or a blunt.

### *Eating (Edibles Such as Candy and Brownies)*

Edibles are made either directly with the dried flower or with THC concentrates, so potency varies widely. In Colorado, one serving in an edible is



measured in milligrams (mg) rather than percentages, and is 10 mg THC per serving. However, not all states are regulated. Be aware that one package (such as a candy bar) could contain 1,000 mg or more, so the serving size consumed is extremely important.

### *Vaping (Such as Oil and Distillates)*

Users vape high-THC oil in a pen. Distillates go through extra refinement processes to remove additional compounds. Once the THC has been distilled, it is re-condensed, and the finished product can be anywhere from

15% to 99% pure THC. Distillates like these are usually vaporized, but users also put them under the tongue, dab them, smoke them, ingest them in a capsule, or infuse them into an edible.

### *Other Products (THC-Infused Soda, Tampons, Suppositories, Toothpicks, etc.)*

The pot industry has created countless ways to get THC into the body through any opening.

Doctor, what you really need to know is this — even today's more potent marijuana plants contain 28% THC<sup>2</sup> or higher (with one grower boasting over 40%), while the weed hipsters rolled in the '70s and '80s was 2-5% THC. Dabs are more than three times more potent than the strongest marijuana plant. A dab is no longer a plant. Dabs aren't natural; they are potent, potentially lethal chemicals. Dab is to marijuana what crack is to cocaine. Depending on potency, one dab is like smoking three to five joints at once. For example, an edible brownie contains one serving of THC which is 10 milligrams. In a variant like Shatter, that is 65% THC, one gram is actually 650 milligrams of THC!

The write-up on a bag of "Scooby Snacks Shatter" reads: "There may be long term physical or mental health risks from use of marijuana including additional risks for women who are or may become pregnant or are breastfeeding. Use of marijuana may impair your ability to drive a car or operate machinery. This product was produced without regulatory oversight for health, safety or efficacy. This product complies with testing requirements. This packaging is child resistant. This product is intended to be inhaled."



**Figure 1.** Shatter marijuana is also known as BHO. It is a hash oil concentrate produced by the use of butane solvent to derive high THC levels from the marijuana plant.

## High Potency THC Users Are Getting Younger and Younger

In addition to no regulatory oversight, here's what's worse—dabbing has become popular among very young people.<sup>3</sup> Many kids start dabbing by age 14. Most of the time, their parents don't have a clue. You see, dab vapor doesn't have the skunky smell most marijuana smoke has. It may not even have a scent at all, so kids can do it behind their parents' backs at home and their teachers' backs in school. Vaping THC doesn't always make your breath stink in the same way tobacco and grass do, so they don't have to be quite as sneaky. Vaping devices can look just like nicotine vaping devices, so check the cartridges. They may tell you they are “just vaping,” but be aware they could be vaping THC. “Vaping” can refer to nicotine or THC while dabbing is only marijuana (Figure 2).

Maybe you think young users are just being typical teens. Maybe you think marijuana is harmless because it's legal. Maybe you think your child is getting straight As, so marijuana can't be affecting him/her. Or your kid

wouldn't do that because you go to church. Well, I used to think all of that, too.

Until the mid-to-late age 20s, a person's brain is still developing,<sup>4</sup> and intoxicants can damage brain development. Hence, one reason why 21 is the legal age for alcohol, pot, and cigarettes (except “medical” marijuana when the legal age is 18 and an oxymoron) is because people don't actually get a prescription. It's recommended “off label.” But numerous medical studies show dabbing can slow mental development and cause depression<sup>5</sup> as well as trigger schizophrenia.<sup>6</sup> And these mental illnesses can lead to suicide.<sup>7</sup> My Johnny only realized that connection weeks before his death.

Compared to heroin or crack, marijuana has a lower addiction rate, but the danger is today's high-potency pot is extremely hazardous to the developing mind. It's highly addictive<sup>8</sup> with dabs being like pot on steroids. There's also a high rate of psychological addiction among young people. Sure, maybe they could stop, but they enjoy the high so much, they don't want to stop. It doesn't take an addiction to dabbing to hurt you. For some who have tried dabbing, it took just one hit to put them in the hospital with life-threatening effects or cause psychosis.<sup>9</sup> My 51-year-old girlfriend landed in the mental hospital for three weeks from hallucinations caused from hitting a dab pen twice. This doesn't even account for all the damage dabbers do to their families<sup>10</sup>—often accidentally, sometimes fatally.

The Retail Marijuana Public Health Advisory Committee (RMPHAC) 2020 report,<sup>10</sup> which is part of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, issued this statement:

“The RMPHAC reviewed the relationships between adolescent and young adult marijuana use and cognitive abilities, academic performance, mental health, and future substance use. Weekly marijuana use by adolescents is associated with deficits in academic and cognitive abilities, even 28 days after last use. Weekly use is also associated with failure to graduate from high school or complete a college degree. Adolescents and young adults who use marijuana are more likely to experience psychotic symptoms as adults (such as hallucinations, paranoia, and delusional beliefs), future psychotic disorders (such as schizophrenia), and suicidal thoughts or attempting suicide. Evidence shows that adolescents who use marijuana can become addicted



to marijuana, and that treatment for marijuana addiction can decrease use and dependence. Additionally, those who quit using marijuana have lower risks of adverse cognitive and mental health outcomes than those who continue to use. Marijuana use is also associated with future use and use disorder for tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs. Adolescent use of marijuana with higher THC concentration (>10% THC) is associated with continued use and development of future mental health symptoms and disorders.”

A joint study from the University of Michigan and Brown University<sup>11</sup> found higher potency marijuana to be more addictive than low potencies. It is associated with a higher risk of cannabis use disorder (CUD) or marijuana addiction in young users. Researchers found that regular pot users who first tried marijuana when the national average THC levels held at 4.9% had almost twice the increased risk of developing symptoms of cannabis use disorder within a year. But those who started regularly using pot when national average THC levels were 12.3% had a 4.8 times higher risk of cannabis use disorder. And yet the state of Colorado continues to allow these high-potency THC products to be sold with no regulation or limitation on potency.

In a nutshell, marijuana harms adolescents in these ways:

- Marijuana dependence<sup>12</sup>
- Decreased IQ<sup>13</sup>
- Increased risk of addiction with higher potency<sup>14</sup>
- Increased odds of using other drugs<sup>15</sup>
- Death from throwing up<sup>16</sup>
- More likely to drop out of school<sup>17</sup>
- Possible psychosis and schizophrenia<sup>18</sup>
- Decreased fertility rates<sup>19</sup>
- Lowered motivation to do things<sup>20</sup>
- Possible paranoia and thoughts that others intend to harm you<sup>21</sup>
- Health damages<sup>22</sup>
- Poor driving skills<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 2.** Dabs are typically heated on a hot surface with the vapors inhaled through a dab rig or dab pen. Dabs are now used frequently by high schoolers and increasingly elementary students in Colorado and other legal recreational marijuana states.

### **My Johnny’s Suicide Was Caused by Dabbing**

Three days before Johnny killed himself, he came over for dinner. He lived in our condo a couple miles down the street and would often pop in for a home-cooked meal. “I need to tell you that you were right,” he said to me. “Right about what?” I asked. “Right about the marijuana. You told me weed would hurt my brain, and it’s ruined my mind and my life. You were right all along. I’m sorry, and I love you.” He died by suicide three days later, a victim of an acute psychotic episode. After he died, we recovered his journal, where he had just written, “the mob is after me.”

So doctor, if you think today’s high-potency marijuana is benign, I hope this article gives you some new information. Please become one of Johnny’s Ambassadors and help us save our youth from the harms of marijuana. And do what you can to keep high THC concentration chemicals from becoming legal for potentially deadly ‘recreational’ use. Don’t let Missouri go to pot!

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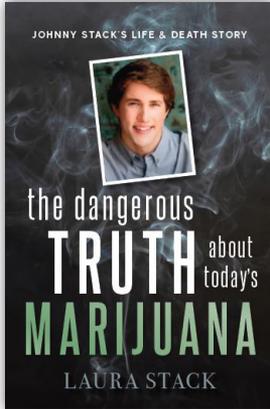


# The Dangerous Truth About Today's Marijuana

by Laura Stack  
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This is the poignant life-and-death story of Johnny Stack, whose young and vibrant life ended by suicide after his descent into addiction to high-potency marijuana and cannabis-induced psychosis.



You'll laugh and cry with his mother, Laura Stack, as she retells the story of Johnny's joyful childhood and then takes you through the unthinkable tragedy of his loss. It's every parent's nightmare. But this book is much more than Johnny's story.

Today Laura, who is a nationally recognized speaker and best-selling author, leads a national

effort of parents, impacted family members, healthcare professionals, coalitions, teachers, and youth who are concerned about the harmful effects of marijuana on our children, teenagers, and emerging adults.

This book is a clarion call for parents across America to educate themselves about the risks of today's high-THC marijuana products and to better understand the potentially devastating effects on youth mental health. Laura's real-life story is backed by recent scientific-based research on how today's potent THC products lead to mental illnesses in adolescents, such as anxiety, depression, paranoia, psychosis, and sadly, suicidal ideation. This book is her vision to dramatically decrease adolescent marijuana usage, the false perception of safety, mental illness, and suicide, to allow our youth to live productive, happy lives

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