

Risk of psychosis greater for people who regularly use high potency cannabis

People who smoke skunk are more likely to develop psychosis than cannabis users who opt for old-fashioned grass. The more skunk they smoke, the greater the risk.

These are the conclusions of a research team at the Institute of Psychiatry who interviewed 280 young people who had had a first episode of psychosis about their cannabis habits. They also interviewed 174 people – also in their 20s – who lived in the same neighbourhood and had no experience of the symptoms of psychosis.

Of those who used cannabis, 78 per cent of people with psychosis used skunk, whereas only 37 per cent of people with no experience of psychosis used this higher potency version.

People who had experienced psychosis were about six times more likely to be daily users, and to have smoked cannabis for more than five years.

'This is the first study to suggest that the risk of psychosis is much greater among people who are frequent cannabis users and those who use skunk. People who are occasional users of hash are less at risk,' said Marta di Forti from the research team. 'People who use skunk every day seem to be in the highest risk group.'

One of the main ingredients in cannabis is THC – tetrahydrocannabinol. Experiments have shown that THC can produce temporary symptoms of psychosis and impair people's memory, and the bigger the dose, the more effect it has. Skunk (or sinsemilla) contains much more THC than old-fashioned hash (cannabis resin). Skunk is between 12 and 18 per cent THC, whereas hash contains two to four per cent.

The other main ingredient of cannabis is cannabidiol: this does not cause hallucinations or delusions and researchers think it somehow counteracts the effects of THC.

While hash contains almost equal amounts of THC and cannabidiol, skunk contains virtually no cannabidiol.

Skunk is now the most widely available type of cannabis in the UK: its share of the street market has grown in the past six years. The researchers found that people who had had a first episode of psychosis preferred high potency skunk.

The study was funded by the Maudsley Charitable Fund and the National Institute for Health Research Biomedical Research Centre for Mental Health. The results were published in the British Journal of Psychiatry in December 2009. The paper was called: *High potency cannabis and the risk of psychosis*.

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