



Advancing Public Health & Equity in Cannabis Policy

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### **Scientific Panel Sounds Alarm On High-Potency Cannabis, Proposes Comprehensive Policy Response**

**Sacramento, CA** – [A report released today](#) by an independent panel of cannabis experts, convened by the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), analyzes the health impacts, including increased risk of dependency and serious mental health conditions, of the highly-potent cannabis products now available in California and offers 20 key policy recommendations to mitigate associated risk.

"As cannabis legalization advances, our report underscores the urgent need for stronger regulatory protections and public education about the dangers of high-potency cannabis," said co-author **Daniele Piomelli, PhD, Distinguished Professor of Anatomy & Neurobiology at the University of California, Irvine School of Medicine, Director of the Center for the Study of Cannabis, and Editor-in-Chief of Cannabis and Cannabinoid Research.** "It's critical to limit exposure to these products, especially for youth, pregnant individuals, and people with mental health conditions, to reduce the potential for long-term health harms."

The committee's recommendations include:

- **Restrict Public-facing Advertising:** Prohibit the use of billboards and other public advertisements seen by children.
- **Limit THC:** Cap the THC levels in cannabis flower and products, similar to regulations in Connecticut and Vermont.
- **Require Lower Potency Options:** Require retailers to offer lower dose options for flower (<10% THC) and edibles (5 mg or less), including products which are more suitable for medical use.
- **Tax base on THC:** Implement taxes based on THC content to help shift consumption patterns, as used in IL, CT and Canada.
- **Regulate Packaging and Marketing:** Require plain packaging as do 4 states and Canada and improved and more prominent health warnings like Canada's and restrict and enforce against other marketing that appeals to children and youth.

- **Prohibit Flavors that Hook Kids:** Expand California's flavored tobacco ban to prohibit added flavors and associated flavor marketing like fruits or candy known to attract kids in all inhaled cannabis products.
- **Educate the Public:** Fund and implement comprehensive public education campaigns on the risks of high-potency cannabis, including mental health risks and strategies for safer use.
- **Track Health Outcomes:** Require and fund ongoing monitoring of cannabis-related adverse health outcomes tied to product potency.

According to the report, levels of  $\Delta 9$ -tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the intoxicating component of cannabis, have risen dramatically over the decades. Today's cannabis in California typically contains 21% to 24% THC—five to ten times higher than in the 1970s and 1980s. The report also highlights the rapid growth of industrially produced extracts and concentrates, such as vaporizer cartridges and dabbing products, which often contain 80-99% THC, along with high-dose edibles like beverages containing up to 100 mg of THC in just 2 ounces.

The findings are intended to guide policymakers and raise public awareness to improve consumer safety in California's evolving cannabis market. The report emphasizes that inaction on these issues is a policy choice with serious potential consequences for mental health, substance use disorders, and other public health concerns. **It states:** "We have passively allowed the shift towards far more potent cannabis products, which are likely to cause significantly greater harm. It is time to change course and recognize that not all cannabis-derived substances can be treated as safe consumer products."

"These new products bear little resemblance to the traditional plant; from high potency flower to concentrates for "dabbing" and vaping they pose significantly greater risks of dependency and triggering psychosis," **said co-author Lynn Silver, MD, MPH, pediatrician and Senior Advisor at the Public Health Institute, Director of Getting it Right from the Start, and Clinical Professor at UC San Francisco.** "Given the growing toll of addiction and mental illness, there is no excuse for further delay in public policy."

The independent group of experts reviewed scientific literature to assess the public health risks associated with high-potency cannabis. They found that higher potency directly increases certain adverse outcomes, such as cannabis use disorder and psychosis, while also promoting more frequent use, which indirectly raises the risk of all adverse outcomes. The report highlights the elevated health risks particularly for youth, pregnant and breastfeeding individuals and their children, as well as those predisposed to mental health conditions.

"This report provides an urgently needed roadmap for implementing policies that do a better job of balancing the benefits of a legal cannabis market with the potential risks to public health," **said economist and co-author Rosalie Liccardo Pacula, PhD, Professor of Health Policy, Economics and Law and Chair of the Health Policy and Management Department at the University of Southern California, Price School of Public Policy.** "Our recommendations focus on regulating cannabis, as the voter's intended, but doing so in a way that considers the harms from excess use of a legal intoxicant and protects youth. Restricting the availability of high-potency products,

[redesigning taxes so they are based on THC content](#), and enforcing youth access laws and marketing restrictions are possible and are strategies already being implemented in other legal jurisdictions.”

Data shows that cannabis use before about age 26 is especially concerning because youth are in a critical period when their brains are still developing. Nationally, past-year use among young adults increased from 23.3% in 1991 to 42.4% in 2023. Daily use among young adults quadrupled over the same period, rising from 2.4% in 1991 to 10.4% in 2023. In short, one in ten young American adults now use cannabis [nearly every day](#). Among adults ages 35 to 50 years, past-year and past-month cannabis use more than doubled and daily use tripled from 2008 to 2023. Between 2008 and 2022, nationally, days of cannabis use increased from [2.3 to 8.1 billion days per year](#). Nationally, cannabis use during pregnancy – a period associated with particularly concerning risks – has more than doubled. Past-month daily or near daily cannabis [use during pregnancy](#) tripled from 0.9% to 3.4% overall and quintupled from 0.5% to 2.5% during the third trimester. In Northern California Kaiser Permanente patients, [prenatal cannabis use increased from 5.5% in 2012 to 9.0% in 2022](#), with striking differences by age, race and ethnicity. These trends coincided with rising cannabis potency, raising public health concerns especially for youth and people who are pregnant.

Report authors are now urging the California Department of Public Health, the Department of Cannabis Control, the State Legislature, and other relevant state agencies to prioritize these reforms and take decisive action to reduce harm, especially among at-risk groups.

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