



Breathe Easy

The number one health tip for cannabis smokers is also the easiest.

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

All drugs pose risks. Drugs that we use and often cherish provide us with desirable benefits, else we would not use them. But cloaked as side effects, those rewards also come with unwanted risks. Whether medicinal or recreational, whether herbal or pharmaceutical, whether legal or illicit, all drugs pose risks.

And all smoke poses risks. Smoke up a drug, and you've stirred up some double trouble. While cannabis is a natural herb, intentionally inhaling its smoke is a grossly unnatural act. Even as an herbal remedy that can benefit a long list of ailments, its smoke can compromise your health. Smoke in any quantity and from any source irritates the respiratory tract. Smoke is its own smoking gun without the need for any gun. Smoking is bad news, which is not even news. You might ignore the facts or fool yourself about smoking, but no smoke and no mirrors can fool your lungs. Even incense, which fools the nose, fouls the lungs.

Like tough love or square circles, healthful smoking is an oxymoron. But we can address how to make smoking less harmful.

To reduce any health risk of smoking cannabis, the number-one safeguard is also the easiest. You have no need to reach into your first-aid kit for this. Nor need you do anything more than what you already are doing. Actually, you need to do something less. So, if you wish to take no special precautions nor to read beyond the next paragraph, then read only this:

After you inhale the smoke or the vape, do not hold it in! It's that simple. When you hold your breath, you put your health on hold. So, don't hold your breath!

It's no coincidence that, if you cough, it's usually on that hold. So breathe naturally and normally, almost as though you were not smoking. Inhale and exhale casually, without fanfare or deliberation. Even tobacco smokers, who may sometimes inhale long and deep drags, seldom hold it in. If they always held their breath the way that most cannabis smokers do, tobacco smokers would all be dead. So take it easy and breathe easy.

When your shaman or mentor or older sibling turned you on as an initiate to the rite of smoking cannabis, your cannabis

coach probably instructed you to inhale deeply and to hold that toke. Such an unfamiliar and unnatural way of breathing may have contributed to your failure to get high on that first try or two. In 1992, while campaigning for the presidency, Bill Clinton admitted that during his college years, "I experimented with marijuana a time or two, and didn't like it, and didn't inhale."

We all know that the blowhard was lying when he notoriously claimed that he *didn't* inhale. Instead, he more honestly should have claimed that he *couldn't* inhale. Clinton quite possibly might have failed because the forced technique of intentionally inhaling smoke and then holding it in was so unnatural and new to him. And unnatural and contrary to normal human physiology for all of us, too.

Cough It Up!

Here comes an anatomy lesson with some physiology thrown in. So, if the mere thought of peeking into your innards makes you feel queasy, consider skipping this section. Or just close your eyes, and I'll let you know when it's over.

Once you fill your lungs with smoke-filled air, holding your breath will promote no further absorption of the cannabinoids. Thus, no further enhanced psychoactive or medicinal effect. Cannabinoids are fat-soluble and quickly absorbed within the lungs. "Tars" is a diffuse term for the hydrocarbons produced by the combustion of plant matter. Tars are not fat-soluble, so are absorbed more slowly. More than any contaminants or debris in smoke, tars muck up the works. Holding your breath only promotes more intake of tars, and therefore more irritation to your lungs.

The literary scion Aldous Huxley rhapsodized about the psychedelic drug experience in his 1954 classic, *The Doors of Perception*. The rock band, The Doors, embraced their name in homage to that book's title. For the cannabis drug experience, cannabinoids enter through the doors of the lungs. Think of your lungs as two huge playing fields with several main players, all on the same team. Your team. For our discussion, the star

athletes are the alveoli cells, the goblet cells, and the cilia cells.

Alveoli cells are tiny air sacs lining the interior membranes of the lungs. They absorb oxygen to assimilate it into the bloodstream. Absorption of oxygen is by design; absorption of other miscellaneous substances is by accident. Cannabinoids just happen to be among the miscellanea that catch a ride with the oxygen.

While the alveoli are the doorways, goblet cells and cilia cells are the doormats. You wipe your feet on a doormat so you won't track dirt into your home.

Cilia cells are delicate hair-like hooks that can become overburdened by an overload of smoke or foul air, regardless of the origin. If too gummed up to do any further heavy lifting, the cilia slacken at their job. Mucus then accumulates in your lungs. Pathogens lurking about and hanging out in the primordial soup in your lungs begin to flourish and multiply. And whammo! You come down with a cold, the flu, an acute case of bronchitis, or a not so cute case of pneumonia. Thus, heavy cannabis smokers compared to nonsmokers have garnered a well-deserved reputation for succumbing to more episodes of respiratory illnesses. So try your best to cough it up and get it out.

Hypoxia, Hyperventilation, and Huffing and Puffing

Some diehard smokers swear by the practice of holding their breath because they consider lightheadedness to be part of their high. Holding your breath, with or without smoke, causes a reduction of oxygen reaching your brain. The havoc wreaked upon your brain cells is called hypoxia. Even without smoking, if you hold your breath long enough, the oxygen deprivation will make you feel giddy or dizzy. You might experience the same sensation from choking on a chunk of meat or from drowning in a pool of water.

It is our human nature to seek altered states of consciousness. Even as children, many of us made ourselves giddy by performing multiple somersaults down a hillside. Or we made our heads spin by standing and whirling our bodies around in circles. We enjoyed as a form of play the dizziness and loopyness that the whirling produced. As adults, some Sufi dervishes do this as a form of prayer, chanting, and meditation, all rolled into one.

Hyperventilation, too, will make you feel lightheaded. As an adult, you might try huffing and puffing, like the Big Bad Wolf blowing down the house of one of the Three Little Pigs. "I will huff and puff and blow your house down!"

Some smokers firmly believe that, until they cough, they will not have inhaled enough smoke to make them high. They anticipate the coughing as their signal that they have smoked enough. Actually, coughing signals that they have smoked too much. While coughing expands the lungs, it is only because it has irritated them.

For a more healthful way of expanding lung capacity, try improved techniques of breathing. Singers and yogis practice it. You can read entire books devoted just to the subject of how to breathe. Or get off your butt and engage in some physical exercise, especially aerobics such as walking, swimming, rowing, biking, or running. Just about any activity except for staring into cell phones or sitting around smoking a joint.

Mark Mathew Braunstein, is the author of five books and a contributor to many holistic health magazines, including five times previously to *Spirit of Change*. This article is an excerpt from his forthcoming book, *Mindful Smoking: Health Tips for Cannabis Smokers*. www.MarkBraunstein.org.