



Marijuana Edibles: New Risk for Young Kids, Threat to Public Health

On Election Day 2016, Massachusetts residents voted to legalize marijuana for adult use. With the yes vote on Question 4, the Bay State joined seven other states in legalizing pot for recreational purposes. On December 15, 2016, anyone who is 21 or older can possess and consume marijuana. It is still illegal for anyone under age 21.

The great concern for Rhode Islanders is the increased availability of marijuana products (marijuana edibles) just over our border.

Marijuana edibles, food or beverages infused with THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana, are sold as “medibles” at medical marijuana dispensaries, but they don’t look like medicine. They look like brand-name candy bars, lollipops, Gummy Bears, fruit drinks, or bakery items – and that poses a risk to young children who may be exposed to them.

The Denver Post reported on March 21 that the number of children coming into Colorado’s largest pediatric emergency department after accidentally eating marijuana edibles is on pace to more than double last year’s total. Most of the children admitted were between 3 and 7 years old.

A Public Health Caution. In addition to the risk of accidental ingestion by

children or not-so-accidental use by teens, the marijuana edibles industry is also drawing the attention of public health officials and legislators, especially in states that have legalized or plan to legalize the recreational use of marijuana. In Colorado, which legalized recreational marijuana last year, sales of marijuana edibles topped

greater risk of overdose because, for example, consumers “assume” a whole candy bar is one serving, but the THC infused candy bar, typically the same size as a regular candy bar, has four to six servings. Overconsumption can cause extreme anxiety, panic attacks, or psychotic reactions, including extreme paranoia. Consumers have a right to a warning.



■ Unlike the food and beverage industry in general, the production of marijuana edibles isn’t regulated. There is no FDA oversight because marijuana is still classified as an illegal drug under federal statutes. State laws, including Rhode Island’s medical marijuana act, focus on the plant and its derivatives, such as hash and oils. They do not regulate production of marijuana edibles or set rules

for advertising to ensure they do not appeal to youth.

A recent article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* titled “Half-Baked – The Retail Promotion of Marijuana Edibles” summarized the public health threats of unregulated THC-infused edibles by saying, “As legalization of marijuana spreads, new adopters should ensure that their regulatory scheme for marijuana edibles is fully baked.”

\$500 million, yet the industry and its products are virtually unregulated. Public health experts raise these concerns about marijuana edibles:

- Packaging is kid-friendly but not child-resistant, and once the product is out of the package, it’s virtually impossible to tell the difference between an off-the-shelf treat and a THC-infused edible.
- Warning labels about dosage limits are often missing. This creates a

