



Association of cannabis use during adolescence, prefrontal CB1 receptor signaling and schizophrenia

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1 **Abstract**

2
3 The cannabinoid receptor 1 (CB1R) is the G-protein coupled receptor responsible for the majority of the
4 endocannabinoid signaling in the human brain. It is widely distributed in the limbic system, basal
5 ganglia, and cerebellum, which are areas responsible for cognition, memory, and motor control. Because
6 of this widespread distribution, it is not surprising that drugs that activate CB1R have expected
7 behavioral outcomes consistent with dysregulated signaling from these areas (e.g. memory loss,
8 cognitive deficits, etc). In the context of this review, we present evidence for the role of CB1R signaling
9 in the prefrontal cortex (PFC), an area involved in executive functions, with emphasis on the
10 developmental regulation of CB1R signaling in the acquisition of mature PFC function. We further
11 hypothesize how alterations of CB1R signaling specifically during adolescent maturation might confer
12 liability to psychiatric disorders.

1 This article reviews the available evidence of long-lasting cognitive deficits induced by cannabis
2 consumption during adolescence and its relationship to schizophrenia, and presents a working model for
3 dissecting the mechanisms involved in this dysfunction based on the current clinical and preclinical
4 knowledge. Because of the role of the prefrontal cortex (PFC) in higher cognitive functions, we have
5 limited our discussion and conclusions to the role of endogenous and exogenous cannabinoid signaling
6 in prefrontal circuits. Importantly, the machinery involved in cannabinoid signaling is found in other
7 cortical and subcortical regions (e.g. amygdala, striatum), which have also been implicated in other
8 aspects of schizophrenia's symptomatology and therefore are beyond the scope of this Perspective
9 Review.

11 **1. Cannabis, cortical development, and the liability for schizophrenia**

13 Adolescence is the transitional period between childhood and adulthood that is accompanied by
14 refinement of cognitive functions thought to underlie the acquisition of mature behavior (Casey et al.,
15 2000;Spear, 2000). Many of these executive functions, such as problem solving, working memory,
16 abstract thinking, and increased inhibitory control are processed by the PFC. Accordingly, the PFC is
17 one of the last brain regions to develop and undergo changes during late adolescence that include
18 increased myelination and synaptic pruning (Andersen, 2003;Chambers et al., 2003;Crews et al., 2007).
19 This active remodeling of brain areas creates a developmental window where environmental factors can
20 affect the normal trajectories of cortical circuits. Indeed, cannabis use during adolescence has been
21 associated with increased liability of developing neuropsychiatric and abuse disorders later in life
22 (Arseneault et al., 2002;Zammit et al., 2002;Arseneault et al., 2004;Caspi et al., 2005;Moore et al.,
23 2007). Specifically, there is a concern that cannabis use/abuse during adolescence results in increased
24 risk of developing schizophrenia-spectrum disorders in adulthood, although the mechanisms underlying
25 such an association still remain unclear (Sewell et al., 2009). Given that adolescence is a period of
26 increased liability to drug addiction due to inherent novelty-seeking (Spear, 2000;Chambers et al.,
27 2003), it is of utmost importance to determine the mechanisms of this impairment for sensible public
28 policy implementation.

30 Administration of cannabinoids to otherwise healthy adult individuals causes psychotic symptoms
31 including paranoia, perceptual alterations, conceptual disorganization, and fragmented thinking, similar
32 to the positive symptoms experienced by patients with schizophrenia (D'Souza et al., 2004). Notably,
33 controlled cannabis administration in patients with schizophrenia exacerbates the positive symptoms and
34 increases the cognitive deficits, suggesting a common underlying mechanism (D'Souza et al., 2005). In
35 addition, adult subjects administered with cannabinoids display deficits in memory recall, attention, and
36 inhibitory control (Hart et al., 2001;D'Souza et al., 2004;Henquet et al., 2006). Although the long-term
37 effects of chronic cannabis use are still debated, acute cannabinoid administration shows mostly
38 transient effects in adult individuals, suggesting that only a specific dysregulation by cannabinoids
39 during developmentally sensitive periods like adolescence could be responsible for the long-lasting
40 deficits seen in prefrontal functioning.

42 In support of this hypothesis, morphological examination of brains from cannabis users has
43 demonstrated significant smaller grey matter volumes in cortical regions when cannabis use starts before
44 the age of 17 (Wilson et al., 2000). Early-onset use of cannabis also results in attentional dysfunctions
45 reflected in reduced phasic alertness and attention (Ehrenreich et al., 1999). Moreover, an early vs. late
46 adolescent exposure to cannabis can give rise to specific impairments in visual scanning, a test that
47 assesses the reaction time to visual stimuli processing (Ehrenreich et al., 1999). Pope *et al* have found
48 that early-onset users (before age 17) show deficits in verbal IQ compared to late-onset users, and differ

1 significantly from control subjects in other verbal functions involving memory and recall (Pope et al.,
2 2003). More recently, Fontes *et al* have established that individuals with early-adolescence onset of
3 cannabis use (before age 15) score poorer in prefrontal-lobe related tasks, and significantly worse than
4 the late-adolescent onset group (Fontes et al., 2011). All in all, the bulk of evidence seems to indicate
5 that cannabis use during or even within specific periods of adolescence can lead to enduring cognitive
6 impairments involving the prefrontal cortex.

7
8 The precise neural substrates underlying cannabinoid-induced cognitive impairments remain elusive;
9 however, evidence suggests that cannabis affects the integration of cortical information. In cortical
10 structures, information processing is thought to be mediated by the synchronization of neuronal
11 networks, such that spatio-temporal integration of networks functionally encodes cortical-related
12 behaviors and cognition. This is typically manifested as changes in cortical oscillations at different
13 frequency bands and synchrony between different regional networks (Buzsaki and Draguhn, 2004). This
14 is especially important in the light that patients with schizophrenia show abnormal oscillations in the
15 theta (4-7 Hz) and gamma range (30-200 Hz), and abnormal synchrony between cortical structures,
16 suggesting aberrant integration of large and local neuronal circuits (Spencer et al., 2003;Uhlhaas and
17 Singer, 2010). Similarly, cannabis smoking decreases theta oscillations, and this correlates with
18 detrimental effects in working memory tasks (Ilan et al., 2004). More recently, D'Souza *et al* have
19 determined that cannabis administration dose-dependently reduces the amplitude of event-related
20 potentials (ERPs, a measure of network responses to a stimulus) in an auditory task assessing attention
21 and cognition (D'Souza et al., 2012). These data indicate that cannabis compromises both context
22 updating and allocation of attentional resources. Similar reductions in ERPs have been observed in
23 schizophrenia and are associated with decreased shift in attention (Rissling et al., 2010). Altogether,
24 cannabis disrupts cortical network dynamics similar to those reported in schizophrenia, suggesting that
25 exogenous cannabinoids can alter the physiology of brain circuits involved in higher-order cognitive
26 processing.

27 28 **2. Endocannabinoids and CB1 receptor signaling in the central nervous system**

29
30 The endocannabinoid system is comprised by the receptors, synthesizing and inactivating enzymes that
31 mediate the actions of natural endogenous cannabinoids (Kreitzer and Regehr, 2002;Lovinger, 2008).
32 The cannabinoid receptor 1 (CB1R) is the G-protein coupled receptor responsible for most
33 endocannabinoid signaling in the brain (Matsuda et al., 1990). It is widely expressed in the vertebrate
34 brain, and at especially high levels in the cortex, hippocampus, cerebellum, and the various nuclei of the
35 basal ganglia where its expression is mostly presynaptic (Herkenham et al., 1991;Pettit et al.,
36 1998;Egertova and Elphick, 2000). Under physiological conditions, CB1R binds the endogenous
37 cannabinoids anandamide (AEA) and 2-arachydonylglycerol (2-AG). These fatty acid-derived ligands
38 are produced in the postsynaptic membrane as a result of neurotransmitter binding to its cognate
39 receptors (Lovinger, 2008). Endocannabinoids then diffuse in a retrograde manner and bind to the
40 presynaptically located CB1R. Here, CB1R signaling is mostly mediated by coupling to pertussis-
41 sensitive Gi/o proteins which effectively inhibit the enzyme adenylate cyclase (Vogel et al., 1993)
42 leading to a local reduction of cAMP levels that decreases PKA activity and leads to activation of A-
43 type K channels. In addition, CB1R signaling inhibits N- and Q-type Ca^{++} currents which are necessary
44 for neurotransmitter release at the presynaptic site (Lovinger, 2008). Because of this generic mode of
45 action, endocannabinoid-mediated CB1R signaling is capable of modulating a broad range of
46 neurotransmitters including glutamate, GABA, dopamine, serotonin, and acetylcholine (Lovinger,
47 2008). In this sense, the endocannabinoid system has a homeostatic role in controlling excessive

1 excitation or inhibition and acts continuously through an intrinsic “tone” (Marsicano et al., 2003; Katona
2 and Freund, 2008).

3 4 **3. The role of CB1R signaling in cognitive functions**

5
6 Interest on CB1R signaling arises from the fact that it is the receptor responsible for binding the
7 psychoactive components of cannabis, most prominently Δ 9-THC, leading to the behavioral
8 abnormalities associated with marijuana use, including but not limited to memory retrieval, euphoria,
9 and in rare cases psychosis (Iversen, 2003). Given that cannabis contains more than 70 known
10 cannabinoids (Elsohly and Slade, 2005), synthetic cannabinoids have been utilized over the years to
11 systematically dissect the role of CB1 receptor in the development and function of the PFC.

12
13 Similar to the effect of cannabis in humans, administration of CB1R agonists in rodents during the
14 adolescent transition to young adulthood (from PD35 to PD65) can lead to behavioral impairments in
15 adulthood that model those observed in schizophrenia. Accordingly, rats chronically treated with the
16 CB1R agonist WIN55,212-2 (WIN) from PD40 to 65 and tested in adult (PD75-150) exhibit deficits in
17 sensorimotor gating, short-term memory, and invest less effort for reward, a proxy for anhedonia
18 (Schneider and Koch, 2003). WIN-treated rats also displayed reduced object-social discrimination,
19 social interaction, and spontaneous social behavior when adults, indicating permanent deficits in
20 recognition memory and increased anxiety (Schneider et al., 2008). Similarly, rats treated with the
21 synthetic cannabinoid CP55,940 from the juvenile period (PD30) to PD51 also display reduced object
22 recognition and social interactions during adulthood (O'Shea et al., 2004). The residual effects in object
23 recognition and anxiety have also been observed in adult rats treated with Δ 9-THC from PD32 to 55
24 (Quinn et al., 2008). Interestingly, rats treated during adulthood lacked any permanent deficits on these
25 behavioral measures, suggesting that cannabinoids had a significant effect only when treatment spanned
26 adolescence (Schneider and Koch, 2003; O'Shea et al., 2004; Bortolato et al., 2005; Schneider et al.,
27 2008). Notably, a recent study found that rats administered with WIN from PD45 to 60 exhibited
28 significant long lasting effects in a hippocampal-dependent task, while a more PFC-dependent task was
29 impaired only transiently (no impairment after 30 days) (Abush and Akirav, 2012). Thus, there seems to
30 be a differential sensitivity to cannabinoids that is dependent on the interaction of the specific
31 developmental window of CB1R activation and the specific ontogeny of brain structures that are rich in
32 CB1 receptors.

33 34 **4. CB1 Receptor expression and signaling in the frontal cortex**

35
36 In considering the role of CB1R in the development of the central nervous system, it is well known that
37 CB1R expression plays an important role during the prenatal and early postnatal period. During this
38 time, CB1R plays a critical role in neurogenesis, axon migration, and synaptogenesis (for review
39 (Harkany et al., 2007)). Consistent with these findings, CB1R expression appears as early as gestational
40 day (GD) 14 and by GD16 is clearly expressed across the developing frontal cortex, hippocampus,
41 striatum, and midbrain (Berrendero et al., 1998). Another study determined that CB1R binding can be
42 detected at different levels by PD10 and increases steadily until adolescence in several limbic regions,
43 including the frontal cortex, striatum, and mesencephalon, after which binding starts declining
44 (Rodriguez de Fonseca et al., 1993). In addition, we have recently demonstrated that CB1R mRNA
45 expression drops in all cortical areas during the adolescent transition to adulthood, most prominently in
46 the limbic/associative cortex (prelimbic, infralimbic, and cingulate). More importantly, this decrease of
47 CB1R expression is associated with a functional decline in CB1R-mediated signaling on excitatory

1 synaptic transmission in the PFC (Heng et al., 2011). Altogether, these data suggest that developmental
2 maturation of the PFC is accompanied by a net downregulation of CB1R function.

3
4 In cortical areas, the CB1 receptor is known to be expressed in pyramidal neurons and to a much greater
5 extent in GABAergic interneurons (Marsicano and Lutz, 1999; Hill et al., 2007), indicating that CB1 has
6 a greater modulatory role in GABA release. In the neocortex, CB1R is expressed to high levels in a
7 subpopulation of cholecystokinin (CCK)-positive basket interneurons and to a lower extent in calbindin-
8 positive interneurons (Katona et al., 1999; Marsicano and Lutz, 1999; Wedzony and Chocyk, 2009).
9 Thus, these CB1-positive GABAergic interneuron populations are independent of the other well-
10 characterized fast-spiking parvalbumin-positive basket cells (Katona et al., 1999; Bodor et al., 2005).
11 Both types of basket cells mediate the perisomatic inhibition of pyramidal cells (Trettel and Levine,
12 2003) and are electrically coupled to its own class (Hestrin and Galarreta, 2005), two distinctive
13 properties that makes them efficient at synchronizing the activity of pyramidal cells. However, CCK-
14 and PV-positive interneurons are differentially sensitive to cannabinoid-mediated effects (Freund, 2003).
15 PV-positive interneurons do not express CB1R (Katona et al., 1999; Marsicano and Lutz, 1999; Bodor et
16 al., 2005; Eggan et al., 2010), and their inhibitory synapses with pyramidal cells are exempted of
17 cannabinoid-mediated retrograde signaling (Harkany et al., 2004; Galarreta et al., 2008).

18
19 In addition to the effects on GABAergic transmission, Fortin *et al* demonstrated in juvenile animals that
20 only glutamatergic inputs to layer 5 pyramidal neurons—the main output layer of the cortex—are
21 subjected to cannabinoid mediated suppression of excitation and not inhibition, while Layer 2/3
22 pyramidal neurons undergo CB1-mediated suppression of excitation and inhibition, indicating that
23 cannabinoids control the glutamatergic input into L5 pyramidal cells but both the glutamatergic and
24 GABAergic input to L2/3 pyramidal cells (Trettel and Levine, 2002; Fortin et al., 2004; Fortin and
25 Levine, 2007). This is consistent with the preferential laminar distribution of CB1R and CCK positive
26 neurons/baskets in Layer 2/3 (Marsicano and Lutz, 1999; Egertova and Elphick, 2000), while deeper
27 layers show CB1R positive varicosities suggestive of axons and terminals (Eggan et al., 2010).
28 Therefore, the developmental decrease in CB1R expression observed in our study (Heng et al., 2011) not
29 only would facilitate excitatory output from the PFC during maturation, but also would increase the
30 cortico-cortical transmission of information received through Layer 2/3 (Figure 1).

31 32 **5. CB1R signaling, GABAergic interneurons, and cortical network oscillations: a working model** 33 **for prefrontal dysfunction induced by cannabinoid exposure during adolescence**

34
35 Initial studies in the hippocampus indicated that acute administration of exogenous cannabinoids reduces
36 cortical network oscillations in the theta and gamma band (Robbe et al., 2006; Hajos et al., 2008).
37 Recently, Kucewicz *et al* have demonstrated that systemic administration of a potent CB1R agonist
38 (CP55,940) reduces gamma oscillations in the PFC as well as hippocampal theta oscillations, which
39 correlates with reduced performance in a spatial working memory task (Kucewicz et al., 2011). Notably,
40 the reduced gamma oscillations observed in schizophrenia are thought to be an expression of reduced
41 GABAergic interneuron transmission in cortical circuits (Uhlhaas and Singer, 2006; 2010).
42 Interestingly, at the cellular level this decrease in gamma oscillations has been linked to reduced
43 function of PV-positive interneurons (Lodge et al., 2009; Sohal et al., 2009; Volman et al., 2011) which
44 lack CB1R. Based on the abundant expression of CB1R in CCK-positive GABAergic interneurons, it
45 would suggest that a dysfunction of this population is at least partially responsible for abnormal
46 oscillations caused by acute CB1R agonist administration. In support of this hypothesis, CCK-positive
47 and PV-positive interneurons are anatomically and functionally coupled for sustaining fast oscillations
48 in the hippocampus (Armstrong and Soltesz, 2012). Future studies will need to determine the role of

1 CB1R signaling in the regulation of such interactions for maintaining gamma-range synchronous
2 activity in the frontal cortex.

3
4 From the developmental perspective, studies from animal models indicate that a remodeling of local
5 inhibitory circuits within the PFC during adolescence requires proper glutamatergic drive from the
6 ventral hippocampus (see review by (Tseng et al., 2009)). In this regard, CB1Rs are also well positioned
7 to exert presynaptic inhibition of excitatory synaptic transmission onto local GABAergic circuits in the
8 PFC. Thus, repeated exposure to THC or excessive activation of CB1 receptors during adolescence
9 could significantly reduce the level of glutamatergic drive needed for the functional maturation of
10 prefrontal GABAergic interneurons. This would result in reduced inhibitory tone to cortical pyramidal
11 cells and consequently decreased synchronization of the prefrontal network.

12
13 Based on the evidence presented above, cannabinoid signaling acts in at least three distinct synapses
14 within the PFC to regulate both prefrontal input and output (Figure 1): (i) GABAergic synapses of CCK-
15 positive interneurons onto pyramidal neurons, (ii) glutamatergic afferents (e.g. thalamus, hippocampus)
16 onto pyramidal neurons, and (iii) glutamatergic afferents onto PV-positive interneurons. While any of
17 these synapses could be the target of acute cannabinoid intoxication, only those synapses that are
18 developmentally regulated could explain the long-lasting deficits seen with early adolescent-onset
19 cannabis use/abuse. The data presently indicate that only the glutamatergic inputs (ii, iii), especially
20 those contacting GABAergic PV-positive interneurons, are developmentally regulated. Thus, adolescent
21 exposure to cannabis could disrupt the glutamatergic facilitation of PV-positive interneuron function and
22 underlie the cognitive impairments seen in adulthood. It remains to be determined whether CCK-
23 positive interneurons follow dramatic developmental changes similar to their PV-positive counterparts,
24 and if so, how would this play in the generation of prefrontal synchrony.

25
26 All in all, these findings suggest that a downregulation of cortical GABAergic function underlies the
27 effects of CB1R stimulation on cortical functioning. In turn, pyramidal neuron excitability will be
28 increased, resulting in an overall disinhibition of the PFC and dysregulation of prefrontal-dependent
29 processes. An overstimulation of the CB1R over sensitive developmental periods could alter the
30 trajectory of any of the above-mentioned circuits leading to the deficits associated with schizoaffective
31 disorders.

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34
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Figure Legend

Figure 1: Working model of prefrontal dysfunction induced by cannabinoid exposure during adolescence. (A) During normal development, the adolescent facilitation of glutamatergic transmission onto prefrontal PV-positive interneurons is thought to determine the maturation local GABAergic transmission in the PFC (Tseng et al 2009). (B) Based on the expression and function of CB1R in the cortex, the acute effect of cannabinoids on prefrontal dysfunction could occur by suppression of synaptic transmission at any of the following synapses (*black triangles*): (i) CCK-positive interneuron → pyramidal neurons, (ii) glutamatergic afferents → pyramidal neurons, and (iii) glutamatergic afferents → PV-positive interneurons. Regarding the long-lasting effects of adolescent exposure to cannabinoids, we hypothesize that cannabinoid-induced (e.g. $\Delta 9$ -THC) suppression of glutamatergic drive onto PV-positive cells will prevent the normal maturation of these interneurons. If such interneuronal activity does not become enhanced during this transitional period, the control of PFC inhibition will be profoundly reduced, resulting in a lack of synchrony in the prefrontal cortex and consequent impairment of cognitive functions.

Figure 1.JPEG

