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## More young Colorado children are consuming marijuana despite efforts to stop them



by

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The number of children — especially very young ones — ingesting marijuana is rising in Colorado despite regulations meant to keep edibles out of kids' hands, and state leaders said they have no plans to revisit those rules this year.

The number of reports the Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Safety office received of kids age 5 or younger exposed to marijuana [skyrocketed from 56 in 2017 to 151](#) in 2021. By 2021, this age group made up nearly half of all marijuana exposures — in which the drug is ingested, inhaled, or absorbed through the skin — reported to the office, which is part of the nonprofit Denver Health organization.

In each of those five years, children were most often accidentally exposed by eating edibles — gummies, cookies, drinks, and other products infused with the psychoactive chemical tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC — and not by inhaling smoke or consuming the drug in other forms, like capsules or tinctures. In 2017, 35 children age 5 or younger were unintentionally exposed to marijuana through edibles, compared with 97 in 2021. Exposures don't necessarily mean the children were poisoned or overdosed, according to the poison and drug safety office.

Marijuana exposures among children are increasing nationwide, with Colorado playing a notable role in this trend. However, the federal government has yet to create uniform protocols, and Colorado health officials haven't conveyed any plans to revise the regulations meant to prevent children from consuming marijuana.

"Marijuana laws and regulations are regularly evaluated by lawmakers, state agencies, local agencies and the various stakeholders," Shannon Gray, a spokesperson at the Marijuana Enforcement Division, which regulates the marijuana industry in the state, wrote in an email to KHN. "A top priority is preventing youth access and to the extent we see opportunity in rules to address youth access, we do so."

Since legalized recreational marijuana sales began in 2014, Colorado has implemented a handful of directives to stop children from mistaking these products for safe, delicious sweets.

Regulations state that:

- No edibles may be manufactured in the shape of a human, an animal, or a fruit.
- All edibles must be sold in child-resistant packaging.
- "Candy" or "candies" isn't allowed on packaging.
- Advertising must not include cartoon characters, or anything else meant to appeal to children.
- The universal THC symbol (! THC) must be on all packaging and stamped on all edible products.

Data from Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Safety does not distinguish between incidents involving marijuana sold by licensed retailers and those involving marijuana from sources that don't follow the state's packaging rules, state health department spokesperson Gabi Johnston told KHN.

When asked whether the mandates are effective, Gray said the Marijuana Enforcement Division has "observed material compliance with these regulations" among marijuana businesses.

Regulation changes could be considered, including those proposed by state legislators, Gray said. But no forthcoming bills concern edible mandates, according to Jarrett Freedman, spokesperson for the Colorado House of Representatives majority. Democrats control both houses of the state legislature.

One limitation of regulating marijuana packaging is that most children 5 and younger can't read, said Dr. Marit Tweet, a medical toxicologist at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. And, she said, many parents don't know how to store marijuana safely.

The state health department has worked to address this knowledge gap through its [Retail Marijuana Education program](#), established in 2014 to teach the public about safe, legal, and responsible cannabis use. One fact sheet advises parents to store marijuana in a locked area, keep products in child-resistant packaging, and avoid using marijuana around children.

Public health officials also launched [a series of marijuana education campaigns](#) in 2018 targeting new parents and adults who influence kids' behavior. Between fiscal years 2015 and 2020, the department spent roughly \$22.8 million on those efforts.

It's hard to say exactly how well marijuana regulations in states like Colorado are working, said Tweet. "It's possible if those regulations weren't in place that the numbers would be even higher."

What's happening in Colorado is part of a national trend. In a study published in January, researchers looked at the number of children younger than 6 who ingested marijuana edibles nationwide from 2017 to 2021. They found 207 reported cases in 2017. In 2021, [that number rose to 3,054 cases](#), according to data from the National Poison Data System.

The legalization of cannabis has likely played a significant role in the rise of accidental child exposures, said Tweet, a co-author of the study. "It's more readily available and more of an opportunity for the children to get into."

Parents may also feel less stigma nowadays in reaching out to poison centers and health clinics, she said.

To understand what factors are driving these numbers, more research is needed into marijuana regulations and the number of child exposures nationwide, said Tweet.

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