

DON'T HOLD THAT HIT!

Take it Easy
and Breathe
Easy

by Mark Mathew Braunstein



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Ingested as a natural herb, cannabis can improve your health. But inhaled as combusted smoke, cannabis can compromise your health. From the tip of your nose to the cilia of your lungs, smoke in any quantity and from any source irritates your entire respiratory tract. You might try to fool yourself about the potential harm from smoke, but no amount of smoke and mirrors can fool your lungs. Even incense, which fools the nose, fouls the lungs.

Fortunately, there are many ways to render smoking less harmful. While health tips about smoking cannabis could fill a book, the most important safeguard is also the easiest. You don't need to do anything more than what you've already been doing. In fact, you need to do something less. 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 that hit!

It's no coincidence that, if you cough, it's usually on that hold. So breathe in naturally and normally, almost as though you were not engaged in the act of smoking at all. Inhale casually and exhale naturally, without fanfare or deliberation. While tobacco smokers may sometimes inhale long and deep drags, they seldom hold it in.¹ If they always held their breath the way that most cannabis smokers do, tobacco smokers would all be moldering in their graves. So take it easy and breathe easy.

When your shaman or mentor or friend first turned you on to weed, 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. That first try or two has failed a lot of folks. It might have failed Bill Clinton. In 1992, while on the presidential campaign trail, Bill Clinton famously admitted that during his college years, "I experimented with marijuana a time or two, and didn't like it, and didn't inhale."² While he was surely lying that he didn't inhale, he more accurately could have claimed that he couldn't inhale. Clinton might have failed because the forced technique of intentionally inhaling smoke and then holding it in was so unnatural and unknown to him. And unnatural and contrary to healthy human physiology for all of us, too.

Cough It Up!

Once you fill your lungs with smoke, holding your breath promotes no further absorption of the cannabinoids,³ and so results in no further enhanced effect, be it psychoactive or medicinal. Cannabinoids are quickly absorbed by the lungs. Tars are absorbed much 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 smoking experience, cannabinoids enter through the doorways 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 and the cilia cells.

Alveoli cells absorb oxygen to assimilate it into the bloodstream. Absorption of oxygen is by design.

Absorption of cannabinoids and terpenes is by accident. While the alveoli are the doorways, cilia cells are the doormats. If too clogged with muck, they both slacken at their jobs. Mucus then accumulates along the inner walls of your lungs. Lurking about and hanging out in the primordial soup in your lungs, pathogens can begin to flourish and multiply. And wham! You come down with a cold, the flu, or bronchitis. Thus, heavy cannabis smokers compared to nonsmokers have garnered a reputation for succumbing to more episodes of respiratory illnesses.⁴ So try your best to cough it up and get that mucus out.

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. So if you find yourself wheezing, coughing, or spitting, nurture your inner child by sparing your inner lungs. When you smoke or even when you vape, don't hold that hit.

Health Tip for All Smokers and Vapers of Either Tobacco or of Cannabis: Once you inhale the smoke or vape, don't hold your breath.

A Breathtaking Experience

Several medical studies have proven that trying to enhance the effects of cannabis smoke by holding your breath is ultimately a waste of your time and a waste of your breath. The first was conducted in 1989,⁵ another in 1991,⁶ a third in 1992,⁷ and a fourth in 1995.⁸ When that was news, and news you could use, some cannabis law reformers and pulmonary medical doctors advised potheads and patients alike to not hold that hit. Since then, their words have seemingly fallen on deaf ears. Thirty years later, that research has languished mostly ignored.

Mitch Earleywine, PhD, is a psychology professor and an author and editor of several scholarly books about cannabis. He has publicized the futility of the deeply held but mistaken belief about holding in your smoke.⁹ When he has warned about this in public lectures, some unreceptive members of his audiences have displayed not just healthy skepticism but downright hostility. They have hurled objects at him, and the projectiles were not mere spitballs or rotten tomatoes.¹⁰ As a lectern does not provide much of shield, his must have been a breathtaking experience.

The Smoke-Kiss

But wait! There can be special occasions when you indeed might want to hold that hit. One logical reason for holding your breath is to use those extra moments to get into position for sharing your breath. Call it the "Smoke-Kiss." Expressed in the vernacular, the Smoke-Kiss is known as "shotgunning" or as a "shotgun kiss," but those violent and misbegotten monikers have long been overdue for overhauls.

If you are impoverished, frugal-minded, or just plain cheap, you can save on the high cost of cannabis by recycling your second-hand smoke. Share it with your significant other(s). Exhale while kissing them, while they likewise inhale while kissing you. As a bonus, your recipients will benefit by having the burning hot smoke cooled down to less irritating body temperature. If they happen to be inexperienced newbies, harsh smoke will not be as hard on their tenderfoot lungs, and they will be less prone to coughing it out.

Acting with altruism in your heart and purely with the interests of science in mind, conduct a practice session. You will likely find that sharing your second-hand smoke gets both of you equally high or equally medicated. Even better, it will add a touch of romance and intimacy into your relationship and will transform the otherwise mundane and repetitive act of smoking into an experience that is both sensual and memorable.

Hypoxia and Hyperventilation and Huffing and Puffing

If some diehards cling to the practice of holding their hits, it could be because they associate lightheadedness as part of their high. With or without smoke, holding your breath causes a reduction of oxygen reaching your brain. The havoc wreaked upon your braincells is called hypoxia. Even without smoking, if you hold your breath long enough the oxygen deprivation will make you feel giddy or dizzy.

Also without smoking, blowhards who want to really knock themselves out can hyperventilate. Hyperventilation, too, makes you feel lightheaded. As an adult, you might try huffing and puffing like in the British fairy tale in which the Big Bad Wolf blows down the house of the first two of the Three Little Pigs. "I will huff and puff and blow your house down!" Go ahead and knock yourself out, though while you're at it you might kill off a few thousand braincells. At least by not huffing and puffing with smoke in your lungs, you won't be damaging any lung cells.

If you remain skeptical about advice not to hold that hit, conduct some animal experiments, the animal being you. Measure two equal doses of your stash. Smoke one dose your usual way by holding in your hits. Take notes about how you feel. Wait two days to clear your head, and then smoke the second dose without holding your hits. Again, take notes about how you feel. Next compare your notes. Did you feel the same high or achieve the same relief? If so, Your Honor, I rest my case.

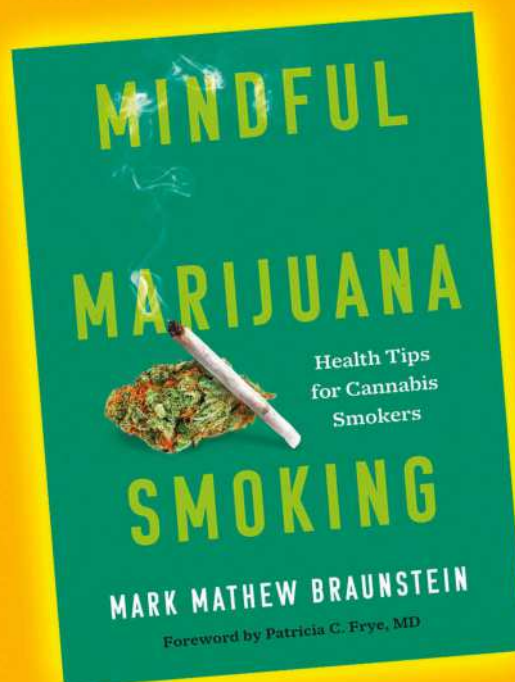
If not, then a lifetime of smoking in your customary manner might have been a hard pattern to change after years or even decades of conditioning. If you still are dead set on holding your breath, proceed with some more animal testing. Research has shown that cannabis smokers will experience the same boost to their high by holding in a placebo of just air,¹¹ so conduct another experiment modeled upon a novel idea suggested by Professor Earleywine.¹² First exhale the cannabis smoke, and then hold your breath. I'd be very interested to learn of your results. I might find it reassuring to know that others in this world besides myself are blowing a lot of hot air.

Mark Mathew Braunstein has contributed to many holistic health and cannabis magazines, including three times previously to *Weed World*. He is also the author of six books, including *Mindful Marijuana Smoking: Health Tips for Cannabis Smokers* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2022), from which this article was adapted. You can read his many newspaper editorials and magazine articles about medical marijuana and recreational cannabis at www.MarkBraunstein.org

Notes

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WELCOME TO WEED WORLD

ISSUE 163

WEED WORLD was founded in 1991 and is a bi-monthly (published every 2 months) magazine. We always knew the true benefits of medical marijuana so, with this in mind, we became a fighter for the cause and a true innovator. Our job was to keep people informed about this wonderful plant and how they can medicate themselves. We are still doing that to this day! Thanks to all of our readers for supporting us over the years and to all of the people who work with us to help create this amazing magazine.

Welcome to issue 163

We have some fantastic articles for you to read. Bethan looks at "Cannabis for Bipolar Disorder: Using the Plant as a Remedy for Manic-depressive Illness"; Mark Braunstein examines getting high in "Don't Hold That Hit safely!"; Mendo Dope Boys are full of nostalgia as they look back over "A Decade Of Dope"; and Paul James explores "Cannabis for Parkinson's Disease: Everything You Need to Know."

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