Tobacco

Smoking has endured as a popular pastime despite early evidence of tobacco’s dangerous effects. Regular users were labeled “slaves” to their habit. This reflects not just the addictive properties of the tobacco alkaloid, nicotine, but the great success of advertising, which helped to foster the habit among women as well as men, rich and poor, at work and at play.

Cannabis had been available in patent medicines sold at pharmacies or via prescription in the 19th century. Recreational users adapted the technique of smoking the leaves of the plants, which had been introduced by Mexican immigrants during the 1920s. This association of the drug with unpopular groups of users undermined its legitimacy as a medical resource for decades. After years of lobbying, some states are permitting sale and private use of the substance.

Marijuana

Fueled by a social and cultural revolution, cannabis had become the most widely-used illegal drug in the United States by the end of the 20th century.
Mind-altering drugs have been used throughout the history of America. While some remain socially acceptable, others are outlawed because of their toxic, and intoxicating, characteristics. These classifications have shifted at different times in history, and will continue to change.

The transformation of a particular drug, from an acceptable indulgence to a bad habit, or vice versa, is closely tied to the intentions of those endorsing its use, and their status in society. This exhibition explores some of the factors that have shaped the changing definition of some of our most potent drugs, from medical miracle to social menace.

The pain-relieving properties of opium had been known for centuries when the drug was first used therapeutically in America. By the 19th century, many doctors believed fervently in the benefits of opium; the enthusiasm for medical treatments created many addicts among doctors and their patients. Yet, reformers’ efforts to restrict opium use focused on Chinese immigrants and the practice of opium smoking that they had introduced to America.

In the late 19th century, physicians recommended cocaine for the treatment of numerous diseases. Widespread use of the drug soon demonstrated the addictive potential of the substance. Nevertheless, cocaine’s low cost made it popular among poorer groups and young people in saloons and dance halls. This association with thrill-seekers and poor laborers fuelled successive waves of panic about the drug during the 20th century.

Fluid Extract Coca for medicinal use, ca. 1910

Cocaine was a breakthrough medical drug because of its application as a local anesthetic.

In the 1980s, a form of smokeable cocaine, known as crack, gained notoriety. While rival gangs fought violently for control of the illicit market, sensational media coverage blamed a crack epidemic for a rise in crime. The ensuing panic led to long prison sentences for users as well as dealers.