

Fact Sheet

Cannabis

What is cannabis?

Cannabis is a depressant drug. Depressant drugs do not necessarily make you feel depressed. Rather, they slow down the activity of the central nervous system and the messages going between the brain and the body. When large doses of cannabis are taken it may also produce hallucinogenic effects. The main active chemical in cannabis is THC (delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol).

Other common names

Cannabis is also known as grass, pot, hash, weed, reefer, dope, herb, mull, buddha, ganja, joint, stick, buckets, cones, skunk, hydro, yarndi, smoke and hooch.

Effects of cannabis

The effects of any drug vary from person to person. How cannabis affects a person depends on many things including their size, weight and health, whether they are accustomed to taking the drug, whether other drugs are present in their body, and the amount taken.

Inhaled drugs reach the bloodstream quicker than those that are eaten. This means that the effects can be felt more rapidly when cannabis is smoked rather than eaten.

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk – even prescribed medications can produce unwanted side effects.

Low to moderate doses

Low to moderate doses of cannabis can produce effects that last two to four hours after smoking. The effects of ingested (eaten) cannabis usually start within one hour. Some of the effects may include:

- › loss of inhibition
- › spontaneous laughter
- › quiet and reflective mood
- › altered perception including sound, colour and other sensations
- › altered memory and thinking, confusion
- › anxiety and mild paranoia
- › altered vision and bloodshot eyes
- › relaxation or sleepiness
- › reduced coordination and balance
- › increased heart rate
- › low blood pressure
- › increased appetite.

Higher doses

High doses of cannabis may produce the following effects:

- › confusion and paranoia
- › restlessness and excitement
- › anxiety and panic
- › detachment from reality
- › decreased reaction time.

Long-term effects

Long-term cannabis use can have many effects:

- › **Brain:** impaired concentration, memory and learning ability
- › **Lungs:** sore throat, asthma and bronchitis
- › **Hormones:** lowered sex drive, irregular menstrual cycle and lowered sperm count
- › **Immune system:** more likely to develop coughs, colds and other illnesses associated with an impaired immune system
- › **Mental health:** heavy and regular use in particular may be linked to a condition known as a drug-induced psychosis, or cannabis psychosis.

There is some evidence that regular cannabis use increases the likelihood of psychotic symptoms in people who are already vulnerable due to a personal or family history of mental illness. Cannabis also appears to make psychotic symptoms worse for people with schizophrenia, and using cannabis can lower the chances of recovery from a psychotic episode.

Taking cannabis with other drugs

The effects of mixing cannabis with other drugs, including alcohol, prescription medications and over-the-counter medicines, are often unpredictable.

When people drink alcohol and use cannabis at the same time, they may have strong reactions such as nausea, vomiting, panic and paranoia.

Some people use cannabis to come down from stimulants such as amphetamines or ecstasy. The mixing of cannabis and ecstasy has been linked to reduced motivation, impaired memory and mental health problems.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Cannabis can be passed on to an unborn baby through the placenta, or to an infant in breast milk. This could harm the baby and increase the chances of going into labour early.

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Driving

The effects of cannabis, such as altered perception, impaired coordination and sleepiness, can affect driving ability. It is especially risky to drive after drinking alcohol and using cannabis, as the combination can increase these effects.

Effects on work

Under occupational health and safety legislation, all employees have a responsibility to make sure they look after their own and their co-workers' safety. The effects of cannabis such as altered perception and impaired coordination can affect a person's ability to work safely and effectively.

Tolerance and dependence

There is evidence that after prolonged use cannabis can lead to dependence. People who are dependent on cannabis find they crave the drug and it becomes far more important than other activities in their life.

Dependence on cannabis can be psychological, physical, or both. People who are psychologically dependent on cannabis may feel an urge to use it when they are in specific surroundings or socialising with friends. Physical dependence occurs when a person's body adapts to cannabis and gets used to functioning with the cannabis present.

Withdrawal

If a dependent person stops taking cannabis, they may experience withdrawal symptoms. People may experience withdrawal symptoms for less than a week, although their sleep may be affected for longer.

Withdrawal symptoms may include:

- › cravings for cannabis
- › loss of appetite and weight loss
- › upset stomach
- › irritability and anxiety
- › sweating, chills and tremors
- › disturbed and restless sleep, often interrupted by nightmares.

Getting help

If your use of cannabis is affecting your health, family, relationships, work, school, financial or other life situation, you should seek help.

A good place to start is with your local doctor who is likely to know your medical history. Your doctor can give you information, a referral to a treatment service and ongoing treatment after specialist treatment is completed.

Another option is self-referral. Many specialist treatment services allow this and you can contact them directly.

Further information

The DrugInfo website (www.druginfo.adf.org.au) has information on:

- › Support services in your state or territory
- › Treatment options
- › Free resources on cannabis.

The Australian Drug Information Network website (www.adin.com.au) has further information about self-referral treatment services.



druginfo.adf.org.au



1300 85 85 84



druginfo@adf.org.au

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Level 12, 607 Bourke Street Melbourne | PO Box 818 North Melbourne Victoria Australia 3051
Phone 03 9611 6100 | Fax 03 8672 5983 | adf@adf.org.au | www.adf.org.au | ABN 66 057 731 192

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