ncpic
national cannabis prevention and information centre

factsheet 4

dependence

Not everyone who uses cannabis will become dependent. Some people, however, will use cannabis for longer and more often, and become dependent on the drug. Historically, cannabis was not seen as a drug of dependence in the same way as heroin or alcohol, but cannabis dependence is now well recognised in the scientific community.

what is cannabis dependence?

Dependence on cannabis means that a person needs to use cannabis just to feel 'normal'. In order to be diagnosed as cannabis dependent, a person needs to experience at least three of the following in the one year:

- tolerance to the effects of cannabis, meaning that more cannabis is needed to get the same effect
- withdrawal symptoms when stopping cannabis, such as irritability, poor appetite, trouble sleeping and feeling depressed
- using more cannabis than was intended
- persistent desire to stop taking cannabis or to cut down and being unsuccessful at this
- spending lots of time obtaining, using or recovering from the use of cannabis
- giving up important activities in favour of using cannabis
- using cannabis even when it is known that it is causing problems

what are the consequences of being dependent on cannabis?

People who are dependent on cannabis are at a higher risk of suffering from the negative consequences of using the drug, such as short-term memory impairment, mental health problems and respiratory diseases (if cannabis is smoked). Regular use and dependence also leads to problems with finances, conflict in relationships with family and friends, and employment problems.

how many people become dependent on cannabis?

It has been estimated that there are at least 200,000 people dependent on cannabis in Australia. About one in ten people who have tried cannabis at least once in their lifetime will become dependent on the drug. The more often you use cannabis the more likely you are to become dependent. If someone uses cannabis every day, then they have a 50/50 chance of becoming dependent. Young people develop cannabis dependence more quickly than adults.

who are most at risk of being dependent on cannabis?

The earlier a person starts using cannabis, and the more they use, the more likely they are to become dependent. Males have higher rates of cannabis dependence than females, as they are more likely to use the drug.

is there any treatment for cannabis dependence?

There are a number of treatment options available for cannabis-dependent people to cut down or quit. It has been found that even a single session with a counsellor can assist the cannabis-dependent person to bring about significant improvements in their level of use and wellbeing. As yet, there are no effective pharmacological treatments available to help reduce cannabis withdrawal symptoms or to block the effects of cannabis.