

what's the
deal?

nctic

national cannabis
prevention and
information centre

cannabis facts
for **young people**

This booklet summarises what we know about the effects of cannabis on your health and well-being. We have done our best to present the facts without any bias. Future research may change some of the information contained in this booklet, but at the time of printing, the information was accurate and up-to-date.

what is cannabis?

Cannabis is the general name used for products made from the plant *Cannabis sativa*, such as marijuana, hash and hash oil. This plant contains over 400 chemicals, with about 60 creating its unique effects. The main mind-altering ingredient in cannabis is THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol). It is mostly responsible for the changes in your mood, thoughts, perceptions and behaviour when you use the drug. Cannabis works by entering your bloodstream, and then travelling to specific cannabis receptors in your brain, where it is activated.

- cannabis works by turning on cannabis receptors in your brain
- the main mind-altering ingredient is THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol)

is cannabis stronger than it used to be?

The strength of cannabis depends on how much THC it contains. This varies from plant to plant and between the parts of the plant that are used.

You may have heard in the media that cannabis is now much stronger, even up to 30 times stronger than it used to be, and that this has caused an increase in the negative side-effects on cannabis users. Data collected over the last 20 years in the USA, Europe and New Zealand show that while the average THC content of cannabis has increased in some countries, there is enormous variation between samples. This means that cannabis users may be exposed to greater variation in a single year than over years or decades. Claims that cannabis is 30 times stronger than it used to be are not supported by the current evidence.

- **the strength of cannabis may have increased a little bit, but there is no evidence that it is 30 times stronger than it used to be**

how long does cannabis stay in my body?

Depending on how you use cannabis, the body absorbs, metabolises (breaks down) and gets rid of THC differently. When you smoke it the effects come on quickly, because the THC is rapidly absorbed into your lungs and enters your bloodstream within minutes.

Cannabis can also be cooked in foods and eaten, or drunk in tea, although this is less common than smoking. When you use it this way the THC takes much longer to be absorbed into your blood, so the effects come on more slowly (about an hour), and last a lot longer than when you smoke it. Because you might use more while you are waiting for the effects to come on, it is harder to control your dose and the effects you experience, which may be unpleasant.

Cannabis is stored in your fatty tissues, slowly released back into your bloodstream and excreted from your body. As a result, traces of cannabis can be found in your urine for up to a month or more, depending on how much, how long and how often you use it.

- **when you smoke cannabis it is quickly absorbed and broken down, but this process is slower and more unpredictable when you eat or drink it**
- **cannabis may be detected in your urine for up to several weeks after your last use**

what effects does cannabis have on my body?

There is no convincing evidence that humans have ever died from a cannabis overdose. However, if you use cannabis you may experience a variety of negative effects which can affect your health and functioning. The severity of these effects depends on several factors. These include: how much and how frequently you use, how you use it (e.g. smoked or eaten), your health, and whether you also use other drugs.

- **cannabis use is very unlikely to cause death, but it can negatively affect your health and functioning**

what happens to my lungs when I smoke cannabis?

Cannabis and tobacco smoke are similar. Cannabis smoke contains even more of some cancer-causing ingredients than tobacco smoke. This smoke can damage your lungs and affect your physical fitness (e.g. for sport) and general health, even when you are young.

Regular cannabis smoking may increase the chances of you developing lung disease, such as chronic bronchitis, or make it worse. Bronchitis causes symptoms such as coughing, phlegm and wheezing. Regular smoking may also interfere with your lungs' ability to resist infections. There is also

growing evidence that regular, long-term cannabis smoking may lead to cancers of the respiratory system (e.g. tongue, lip, throat) in young adults.

The way you smoke cannabis affects your risk of experiencing these effects. Smoking rapidly, inhaling deeply and holding your breath increases the toxins that you absorb into your lungs, without making you feel more stoned. If you smoke tobacco or mix it with cannabis, the effects of both of them together are worse than either of them alone.

- **smoking cannabis can harm your lungs and affect your physical fitness, even when you are young**
- **smoking rapidly, inhaling deeply and holding your breath exposes your lungs to more toxins without giving you a bigger stone**
- **smoking cannabis and tobacco together can also make things worse for your lungs**

i've heard that cannabis can help my asthma – is that true?

One of the short-term effects of the THC in cannabis is to expand the airways in your lungs, even if you have asthma.

While you may feel this short-term effect of smoking cannabis provides you with relief, you are also exposing your lungs to the toxins contained in the smoke. Regular smoking can cause irritation and damage to your lungs, especially if you have a lung disease. Cannabis is not a treatment for asthma and causes it to get worse rather than better because of its inflammatory effects.

- **you may feel short-term relief when you smoke cannabis, but regular cannabis smoking will irritate and may damage your lungs**

can I become dependent on cannabis? i.e. is cannabis addictive?

Most people don't use cannabis regularly or develop problems with it. A small proportion of people, however, will become dependent on cannabis. The chance is similar to the chance of becoming dependent on alcohol. If you are dependent you may have difficulty controlling your use, and spend a lot of time involved with cannabis and less time on other things in your life.

Some regular users also experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop because their body has become so used to it. They may feel restless and anxious, have difficulty sleeping, and lose their appetite. Symptoms are usually quite similar to tobacco withdrawal and compared with alcohol withdrawal are quite mild. They usually stop after a few days, but sometimes they last longer. Some people develop 'cravings', an intense desire for cannabis, which are very difficult to overcome.

Being dependent on cannabis increases your exposure to its negative physical and psychological side-effects. It also means that you do not feel you are in control of your cannabis use. We do not know exactly how much you need to use before you become dependent on cannabis. However, the more frequently you use it, the greater the chance that you will become dependent. Some research suggests that young people can become dependent on cannabis using lesser amounts, and in a shorter time, than adults. Whenever drug use starts occupying larger and larger amounts of your time, it signals that you are relying on it rather than developing other aspects of your life. These circumstances place you at risk for becoming dependent.

- **a small proportion of cannabis users become dependent. They have difficulties controlling their use even if it is causing them problems**

- some people experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop using
- the more frequently you use cannabis and rely on it in your life, the greater the chance you will become dependent on it

how does cannabis affect my brain?

Your memory and attention may be affected when you are stoned, which can interfere with your ability to take in and remember new information, Cannabis use probably doesn't cause severe irreversible damage to your brain or mental processing, but if you use cannabis heavily over many years you may experience more subtle problems with memory, attention, and the ability to handle complex information. This can affect your everyday life, particularly if you are learning something new or doing something difficult.

- cannabis use is unlikely to cause serious irreversible brain damage
- if you are a long-term, regular user you may experience some problems with memory and attention

what effect does cannabis have on mental health?

Some people experience very unpleasant psychological effects when they use cannabis, like severe anxiety, paranoia, or panic reactions (a fear of going mad). At very high doses, confusion, delusions (beliefs not based in reality), and hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't really there) may also occur, but this is uncommon. These symptoms are more likely to be felt by people who aren't used to the effects of cannabis or have smoked more than they are used to. They do not usually last after the effects of the cannabis wear off, but can be very frightening.

Some people are more likely to be affected than others; they are more vulnerable to the psychological effects of cannabis than others and should avoid using. If you have a family history of severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, or are vulnerable to developing such problems, cannabis use might trigger an episode. You may not be aware that you are vulnerable. If you already have an illness like schizophrenia, cannabis use may make some of your symptoms worse, prolong episodes, or cause you to relapse.

- **cannabis use might trigger problems if you have a family or personal history of severe mental illness or are vulnerable to developing it**
- **if you already have a serious mental illness it may make some of your symptoms worse and you are strongly advised to avoid cannabis use**

are there added risks to smoking cannabis for young people?

Generally, the earlier you start using cannabis and the more heavily you use it, the more likely it is you will continue to use it and develop problems with it. Your chances of having problems with cannabis may also increase if you already have emotional problems, or problems at school, at home, or with the law.

Using cannabis regularly when you are young and your body is still developing increases your body's exposure to the harms associated with cannabis use. This may interfere with your options and choices in life, now and in the future.

- **the earlier and more heavily you use cannabis, the more likely you are to continue using and develop problems. This may affect your choices and options in life**

what if I'm pregnant or want to have kids?

Using cannabis when you are pregnant may affect the development of your baby, leading to premature birth and smaller birth-weights. Both of these outcomes are dangerous for the survival and health of your baby. These effects may be made worse by smoking tobacco, because the effects of smoking tobacco and cannabis during pregnancy are similar.

THC can cross the placenta into the baby during pregnancy and pass into your breast milk after your baby is born. So, if you smoke cannabis and breast-feed, the baby gets the THC into their body as well. The developing nervous systems of babies and young children are very vulnerable.

For these reasons it is best to be safe and not use cannabis during pregnancy or breast-feeding and to avoid smoking it near young children.

We are still not exactly sure how cannabis affects fertility, but there is some evidence that it may reduce fertility in men and women and interfere with the hormones associated with reproduction. Although occasional cannabis use is unlikely to cause severe problems, if you are experiencing fertility problems you should not smoke cannabis.

Passive cannabis smoking by babies is also potentially risky so children should not be exposed to cannabis smoke.

- **using cannabis when you are pregnant or breastfeeding may affect the development of your baby, as the cannabis gets into their body too**
- **regular cannabis may affect fertility and the hormones connected to reproduction**
- **children should not be exposed to cannabis smoke**

is it dangerous to drive while I'm stoned?

Being stoned can affect your ability to do things like drive or operate machinery. Driving under the influence of cannabis increases the risk of having an accident by 2-3 times. You may find it hard to divide your attention between several tasks or hold your attention for a long time. You may also find it harder to react when something unexpected happens. You may experience some of these effects even when you don't feel stoned anymore. So you should not drive while you are stoned, or if you are still feeling the effects of a big night or session, even if it was hours ago. Also, combining cannabis and alcohol affects your driving more severely than either drug alone, so don't combine the two. Remember, other people are affected by your driving, not just you.

- **cannabis affects your ability to react and pay attention on the road, even when you are no longer stoned**
- **driving under the influence of cannabis increases the risk of having an accident by 2-3 times**
- **driving after using alcohol and cannabis is even more dangerous.**

is cannabis use still illegal?

Cannabis is illegal in all Australian states and territories, but each one has different laws and penalties. In some places the possession and use of small amounts of cannabis have been decriminalised. This does not mean that cannabis use is legal in these places, it means that if you are caught, you may have to pay a fine and can still end up having a criminal record.

Most of the drug arrests in Australia relate to cannabis. While being 'busted' for cannabis may not seem a big deal when you are young, having a criminal record for a cannabis offence may restrict your options for things you want to do in life, such as employment or travel, for the rest of your life.

- **cannabis is illegal in every state and territory in Australia**

acknowledgements

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For more information contact:

**National Cannabis Information
and Helpline**

1800 30 40 50 (toll free)

Useful websites include the following:

**National Cannabis Prevention
and Information Centre**

www.ncpic.org.au

Kids Helpline

(24 hour telephone service)
1800 55 1800:
www.kidshelp.com.au

**Reachout – an interactive
website for young people**

www.reachout.com.au

**Somazone – a website by and
for young people**

www.somazone.com.au