

Cannabis / Marijuana¹

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis (from Greek *kannabis*) is a plant, which can be used to produce hemp fibre or a psychotropic (mind altering) drug. It is sometimes referred to as *hemp* or *marijuana*. While the knowledge that something could alter one's mind should be a danger signal, some people nevertheless choose to ingest cannabis for just this purpose.

Cannabis Use

Using cannabis is illegal in Australia, and for very good reason. Its effects are deadly and dangerous. Since the 1970s, cannabis use as a 'recreational drug' has increased in Australia, along with its devastating consequences. Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug

Cannabis use often starts in the teenage years, and continues into the early or late twenties. Some users then stop and don't use again. Once stopped, whether complete recovery from the effects occurs depends on several factors, including the person's sensitivity to the drug, genetic predisposition, existing behavioural and emotional problems, use or exposure to other drugs, lifestyle factors and the quantity and frequency of use.

Some cannabis users may go on to use 'harder' drugs, such as heroin (and more recently 'ice'). Others may continue to use cannabis for many years, either frequently or infrequently. If a user combines using cannabis with nicotine, they will develop a nicotine dependence in addition to a dependence on cannabis, compounding the damaging physical and mental health effects.

Physical Effects of Cannabis

The effects on physical health can be very serious, leading to death.

- ◆ Increased heart rate, causing or worsening existing cardio-vascular problems
- ◆ Reproductive problems, including lowering the birth weight of offspring
- ◆ Possible but likely adverse effects on the immune system (animal studies show that this occurs, but research on humans is not yet conclusive)
- ◆ Adverse effects on driving, causing accidents, injury (often serious brain injury) and death

Mental Effects of Cannabis

Illicit drugs, including cannabis, can trigger mental health problems or make existing ones worse. The results can be fatal. Cannabis worsens the symptoms of existing mental health problems. If you don't have one to start with, you will probably to develop one, especially psychosis, in the long term.

Health problem are more likely for those starting to use cannabis when under 18-years of age, or who use it regularly or over a long period of time. Unpleasant psychological effects can occur like severe anxiety, paranoia or panic. Heavy or frequent use of cannabis may lead to depression later in life, especially for women. The most common effects are:

¹ Taken from several sources, including: *Cannabis in Australia Use, supply, harms, and responses* Monograph series No. 57 Report prepared for: Drug Strategy Branch Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing Report prepared by: Jennifer McLaren & Richard P. Mattick; *Taking Care of yourself and your family*, Beyondblue 2009; *Drug use and your mental health*, Beyondblue, 2013 and *Cannabis and your mental health*, Beyondblue, 2013.

- ◆ Impairs cognitive functioning, including arithmetical abilities, attention, reaction time, short-term memory, and time awareness.
- ◆ Long term use is likely to cause irreversible cognitive impairment
- ◆ Can cause psychosis, including schizophrenia
- ◆ Increases the severity of psychosis and schizophrenia in persons with these illnesses

Symptoms of Psychosis that could be experienced include one or more of the following:

- ◆ Auditory hallucinations - hearing voices that aren't there
- ◆ Visual hallucinations – seeing things that aren't there
- ◆ Delusions – believing things that aren't true
- ◆ Jumbled thoughts and strange behaviour

Other general mental health problems include:

- ◆ Aggressiveness
- ◆ Anxiety
- ◆ Apathy
- ◆ Confusion
- ◆ Depressive symptoms (such as loss of interest and motivation, withdrawal, lowered libido and lethargy)
- ◆ Impaired memory and learning
- ◆ Panic
- ◆ Paranoia

The psychological effects can have a 'flow-on' effect in other areas of life, such as interpersonal problems and conflict at home, school or work, financial problems, memory problems, and crime.

Treatment for Cannabis Use

Treatment to kick cannabis use is dependent to some degree on the amount, frequency and dependency of use. Some people who are not heavy or long-term users just decide to quit. They realise one day that what they are doing is harmful and want to stop. And they do just that, usually feeling much happier and freer when they do.

Heavy or long-term users are likely to need help and support to quit. There are many places offering help. Your GP may be a good place to start. The National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre (NCPIC) <https://cannabissupport.com.au/> offers information and help.

Therapies that have been found useful to help 'cannabis survivors' are Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and motivational enhancement therapy. Brief intervention programmes are also helpful.

If you or anyone you know wants help quitting cannabis or any other drug or addiction, why not consider MiCBT (Mindfulness-integrated-Behaviour Therapy)? MiCBT offers skills to manage emotions, emotional regulation and withdrawal, as well as the multitude of problems associated with cannabis use, such as anxiety and depression. Get in touch below for help or to know more.

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