

CANNABIS: THE FACTS

WHAT IS CANNABIS?

Cannabis is the most commonly used illegal drug in Australia. It is made from the dried flowering heads and leaves of a plant called cannabis sativa. Other names for cannabis are marijuana, grass, mull, pot, dope, gunja, yarrdi, weed, ganga, mull, doobie, mary jane, bud, hash, bhang, skunk, head, hydro, chronic, bush, hooch, joints, brew, reefers, cones, smoke, buddha, and green.

It looks like dried herbal material and can be green or brown in colour. Cannabis is usually smoked in hand-rolled cigarettes called joints or in water pipes called bongs. Sometimes it is mixed into food, such as cakes and cookies, and eaten.

WHAT IS THC?

THC (delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol) is the chemical in cannabis which makes you feel high. This means you experience a change in mood and may see or feel things in a different way.

Some parts of the plant contain a higher level of THC. For example, the flowers or buds have more THC than the leaves.

SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS

Synthetic cannabinoids function similar to THC and bind to the same cannabinoid receptors in the brain and other organs.

A wide variety of synthetic cannabinoid products are available as smoking mixtures on the Internet and in specialised shops (For example, mixed with a range of dried plant products.)

These drugs may have much more potent effects than herbal cannabis and can also cause strong unpleasant effects that are not usually experienced with cannabis.

HOW DOES THC AFFECT YOU?

When cannabis is smoked, THC goes quickly into the blood through the lungs. It then goes to the brain and this is when the *high* is felt. This can happen within a few minutes and can last up to five hours from each time the smoke is inhaled.

When cannabis is eaten, THC is absorbed more slowly into the blood as it has to pass through the stomach and intestine. Not only does it take longer to experience the *high* when the drug is used in this way, the effects can also last for much longer, particularly those that are regarded as unpleasant by the user, such as hallucinogenic effects.

THC is distributed in the body's fat, liver, lungs and spleen where it is broken down and mainly excreted in the urine. The metabolism of the THC by the body forms break down products called metabolites which are the chemicals tested for in most drug screens. When cannabis is smoked more than weekly these break down products accumulate in the body, so they can take more time to be out of the system completely and those who use cannabis regularly can take up to three months to have negative urine drug tests.

EFFECTS OF CANNABIS

The effects of cannabis will depend on:

- how much you take
- how often you take it
- how strong the cannabis is
- how the cannabis is taken (joint, bong, food)
- your mood
- your experience with cannabis
- whether cannabis is taken with other drugs, such as alcohol, which can increase the effects of both drugs.

The effects of cannabis can last up to five hours from each use.

PHYSICAL EFFECTS

You may:

- feel unusually well and happy
- talk and laugh more than usual
- have bad balance and coordination
- feel drowsy
- feel like your senses are heightened (e.g. hearing, smell, touch)
- feel hungry
- have a faster heart rate
- have dry, red eyes
- have a dry mouth and throat
- have increased risk of getting bronchitis, lung cancer and other diseases of the respiratory system
- have decreased sex drive
- vomit
- be restless
- have impaired capacity as a parent/primary carer of children
- do or say things which you normally wouldn't, such as risk-taking behaviour like unsafe sex or dangerous driving

- 'black out' (temporary loss of memory)
- 'green out' (feel sick after smoking cannabis, go pale and sweaty, feel dizzy, nauseous, may vomit and lie down straight away. This is more likely to happen if a person has been drinking alcohol before smoking cannabis rather than the other way around).

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

If you use cannabis you may experience the following health problems:

- feel confused
- experience change in your perception of time, sound, sight, touch and distance
- see or hear things which are not there (hallucinations)
- feel distant or separate from reality
- feel anxious or panicky
- dependence (get addicted to cannabis)
- decreased motivation
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems remembering things
- focus on one particular thing and ignore all other things
- depression
- experience anxiety and paranoia
- psychosis – this is more likely if the person already has a schizophrenic condition or has a pre-disposition to schizophrenia which can be triggered by cannabis use.

MIXING WITH OTHER DRUGS

It can be dangerous to mix cannabis with other drugs such as alcohol or prescription drugs. This is because the effects of cannabis and the other drug can become stronger and produce more unpredictable effects than if they were used separately.

CANNABIS RELATED EMERGENCY

If someone is physically sick and vomiting, **never** leave them on their own. They could suffocate on their own vomit.

If someone is experiencing hallucinations, panic attacks, anxiety or paranoia, take the person to a quiet place and stay with them. Try to calm them down and reassure them that these feelings will pass in time.

If there is nothing you can do and the person continues to feel bad, their condition gets worse or you are concerned that they may have sustained a head injury from a drug related fall – call an Ambulance immediately – **dial Triple Zero (000)**.

If the person has been mixing cannabis with other drugs, tell the NSW Ambulance paramedic exactly what they have taken. Paramedics are there to help. Generally paramedics don't involve the police **unless** there is danger to themselves or other people/children, someone dies, or a crime (such as violence or theft) has been committed.

TOLERANCE AND DEPENDENCE

Anyone can develop a tolerance to cannabis, meaning you need more of the drug to experience the same effects. Physical and psychological dependence on cannabis can also develop. Dependence on cannabis means that it takes up a lot of your thoughts, emotions and activities and can lead to problems with health, finances, conflict in relationships with family and friends, and employment problems.

WITHDRAWAL

Cannabis withdrawal symptoms usually consist of:

- sleep difficulties including insomnia and strange dreams
- mood swings/irritability
- depression
- anxiety/nervousness
- restlessness/physical tension
- reduced appetite
- nausea
- cravings to smoke cannabis.

Whilst individual symptoms can be relatively mild, in combination they can still contribute to why a person keeps using cannabis (also may be why they started using cannabis in the

first place) and why they may relapse if trying to quit.

Most studies suggest that withdrawal symptoms start on the first day of abstinence, and usually peak within the first two to three days of quitting, with the exception of sleep disturbance.

In general, withdrawal symptoms are usually over after two weeks, but this depends on how dependent someone is on cannabis before trying to quit.

If you are experiencing problems with withdrawal, contact your doctor or health centre.

PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

It is best not to use any drugs during pregnancy. THC passes from the mother to the unborn baby through the cord. There is some evidence that women who smoke cannabis may give birth to underweight babies or babies born too early. Other studies show that newborn babies may have trouble sleeping if their mother used cannabis during pregnancy. Also, in the first six months of life, babies who have been exposed to cannabis in-utero are at a greater risk of developing asthma, chest infections and other breathing problems such as wheezing. Babies born to women who smoke cannabis in pregnancy may develop learning problems as children. Inform antenatal staff of cannabis use and attend regular antenatal checkups.

If a pregnant woman smokes cannabis with tobacco – the most common way of using cannabis – the unborn baby is exposed to the risks presented by tobacco smoking. Visit the NSW Health website for more information on the risks of smoking: www.health.nsw.gov.au/quittingsmoking

In addition, there exists some evidence that mothers' cannabis use during pregnancy increases the risk of their children developing childhood cancers.

Cannabis also passes into breast milk, which means that it is likely to affect a breast-fed baby. It is generally risky to take any drug while breastfeeding without medical advice.

DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF CANNABIS

Using cannabis makes it more difficult to drive safely. It is illegal to drive under the influence of any illicit drugs, including cannabis as you could lose your licence for a set time or be fined.

Police can test drivers to see if they have recently smoked cannabis. Anyone under the influence of cannabis who kills or injures another person while driving can be sentenced to a term in prison.

THE LAW

Using cannabis is illegal in Australia. If you use, sell or give cannabis to someone else and get caught, you could face substantial fines and penalties including a prison sentence. This also includes items used to consume cannabis such as bongs.

In NSW, first time offenders caught carrying a small amount of cannabis may be issued with a formal caution, which can include information about the harms associated with cannabis use and a number to call for drug related information or referral. A person can only receive up to two cautions.

SELF-HELP ASSOCIATIONS

na.org.au for **Narcotics Anonymous Australia**, a non profit fellowship or society of recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean via a program of complete abstinence from all drugs.

INFORMATION AND ADVICE

National Cannabis Information and Helpline (NCIH) provides help and advice about cannabis related issues, call **1800 30 40 50**

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline: 1800 250 015**.

It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in the state or territory you are calling from.

Your room provides drug and alcohol information and advice, campaigns and resources. Visit www.yourroom.com.au

Cannabis Clinics provide assessment and counselling for individuals about their cannabis use, offer education, support and brief counselling to concerned family members and provide specialised treatment for people with co-existing cannabis and mental health issues. Contact ADIS **1800 250 015** for your local clinic.

Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council provides links to Aboriginal community controlled health services across NSW. Visit www.ahmrc.org.au for information about AHMRC members including a regional map, information and links to members websites.

Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC) provides services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Contact DAMEC on **(02) 8113 1301** or for counselling and support services for CALD communities call **(02) 8706 0150**.

Drug Info provides facts and resources on alcohol and other drugs and the prevention of related harm. Visit www.druginfo.adf.org.au

State Library of New South Wales Drug Info provides up to date information on alcohol and other drugs in public libraries throughout NSW. Visit www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au

eheadspace provides mental health and wellbeing support, information and services for young people (12-25 years) and their family and friends. Visit www.eheadspace.org.au

Family Drug Support provides 24-7 telephone support to families in crisis due to drug and alcohol issues. Call the Helpline on **1300 368 186** or visit www.fds.org.au

Kids Helpline is a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years. Counselling is offered via the Kids Helpline website www.kidshelp.com.au or email, or call **1800 55 1800**.

Nepean Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (NYDAS) works within a holistic model of care to address a range of issues for young people (12 -20 years of age) related to their alcohol and other drug use. Call **(02) 4734 2129** or **(02) 4734 1333**.

NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA) is a peak drug user organisation in NSW providing harm reduction information and blood borne virus prevention peer education. Visit www.nuaa.org.au

Poisons Information Centre is a 24/7 call centre service available across Australia. Call **13 11 26**

ReachOut is an Australian online youth mental health service with a mobile-friendly site and forums where you can access help, information and support. Visit au.reachout.com

Sexual Health Info Link provides free and confidential sexual health support and information. Visit www.shil.nsw.gov.au

TAFE NSW provides help with education, career development or personal matters. Students can contact a local TAFE/ university counsellor. Visit www.tafensw.edu.au

Youth Action is the peak organisation for young people in NSW. Visit www.youthaction.org.au and use the search option to access a directory of NSW youth services.

Youth Solutions provides services for young people 12 to 25 years of age and the community including prevention and health promotion, drug and alcohol education, community programs and information and referral. Visit www.youthsolutions.com.au or call **(02) 4628 2319** [provides services to young people in Macarthur & Wingecarribee].

NSW Health aims to reduce drug-related harm for individuals and the community by providing the facts, including the possible health, social and economic consequences of using alcohol and other drugs.

A range of drug and alcohol fact sheets is available for download at: www.yourroom.com.au