

Special Topic: Marijuana Information - Cannabis

Cannabis, a Class C controlled drug, is composed of dried plant material from the Indian hemp plant Cannabis Sativa. The active ingredient is THC (tetrahydrocannabinol). Other forms of cannabis are hashish (dried cannabis resin and compressed flowers) and hashish oil (oil extracted from the plant with an organic solvent). Hashish and hashish oil contain significantly higher levels of THC and are Class B controlled drugs. New Zealand grown cannabis also contains higher levels of THC than that grown overseas.

Why Do People Use Cannabis?

Cannabis is a Central Nervous System depressant. In small doses it relaxes the user and produces feelings of euphoria and increased social confidence. Sometimes people use cannabis to escape their problems (unfortunately they always come back!). Also, young people often experience peer pressure to “share a joint” with friends in a social setting, in the same way they feel social pressure to use tobacco or alcohol.

So what’s the problem?

The occasional recreational use of a small amount of cannabis is unlikely to cause problems, but higher or more frequent doses can

- Increase the risk of accident due to impaired balance and co-ordination, reduction in attention, short-term memory and reaction time, slowed information processing and motor performance and impaired perception of time (whew!)
- Study or work can be affected by the reduction in concentration, short-term memory and information processing.

Long-term effects of frequent use include

- Increased risk of respiratory diseases, including acute and chronic bronchitis, lung cancer and cancers of the mouth, throat and upper respiratory tract (cannabis smoke is more irritating to the respiratory tract than tobacco smoke and combining the two increases the risk).
- The possibility of “Amotivational Syndrome,” including reduction in energy, drive and motivation – work, study and active hobbies can suffer.
- In some vulnerable individuals a short-term cannabis-induced psychosis can occur, producing confusion, amnesia, delusions, hallucinations, anxiety, agitation and hypo manic symptoms.

Effects on mental health

A small percentage of people experience adverse psychological effects from occasional or first time cannabis use. Some people experience their first-ever panic attack after/during exposure to cannabis. Heavy or frequent users are at higher risk of the following –

- anxiety, panic, paranoia, fear of going mad
- depression
- psychotic symptoms, including delusions and hallucinations (at high dose).

But I thought cannabis wasn't addictive

The possibility of developing a dependence on cannabis is very low for occasional users; however frequent users can develop both a physical and psychological dependence. This results in an increased amount of cannabis being used to "feel normal". The anxiety, agitation and depression often caused by heavy use of cannabis are managed by increasing the frequency and amount used. This leads to other problems –

Social/Interpersonal Effects

- Can have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships. Intoxication with cannabis can result in communication difficulties and lack of responsibility in attending to important obligations.
- Heavy users can find they are facing increasing financial difficulties due to the cost of their habit and time taken from work or study
- Cannabis use is illegal. Users face the possibility of criminal conviction.

So will I get withdrawal symptoms if I stop using cannabis?

When frequent, heavy users of cannabis decide to stop using they can experience a mild withdrawal syndrome, including some of the following symptoms –

- anxiety, restlessness,
- agitation
- diarrhea
- irritability
- anorexia (temporary)
- flu type symptoms
- hot flushes/sweating

The symptoms largely resolve in one week but may persist in a milder form for one month. It may take several months to several years (depending on patterns and length of use) for all the chemicals to leave your brain and body.

What shall I do if I want to give up?

- You could make an appointment with a local Substance Abuse Counselor. (They are listed in the phone book.)
- You could talk to a counselor at Student Counseling Services. We can provide information and support to make sure you get the help you need.
- Both these options offer confidential support.

A final thought:

"What hashish gives with one hand it takes away with the other: that is to say, it gives the power of imagination and takes away the ability to profit by it."
Baudelaire 1860