



CANNABIS

Cannabis is classed as a depressant. Depressant drugs do not necessarily make you feel sad; rather they slow down the activity of the central nervous system.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

There are three popular forms of cannabis:

Marijuana – most common and least powerful. Marijuana is the dried leaves and flowers of the plant.

Hashish – dried cannabis resin, usually in the form of a small block. Blocks range in colour from light brown to nearly black. Hashish is generally more potent than marijuana.

Hash oil – thick oily liquid golden brown to black in colour which is extracted from hashish or marijuana.

Use in Australia

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household survey showed 33.5 per cent of Australians aged 14 years and older have ever used and 9.7 per cent have used cannabis in the previous 12 months (2008 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare).

Effects: Immediate

- Relaxation and loss of inhibition – Cannabis can make the user feel happy, relaxed and comfortable. They may feel less inhibited, friendlier and laugh spontaneously. Users can also become quiet, reflective and may become sleepy.
- Increased appetite – cannabis often increases the appetite and leads to snacking on food.
- Affected perception – Cannabis can increase awareness and the perception of colour, sound and other sensations. It can affect vision and perception of time and space.

- Lowered coordination – cannabis decreases coordination and balance making it dangerous to drive or operate machinery.
- Thinking and memory and the ability to think logically. People can lose track of what they are saying or thinking and become confused and disorientated. Some people may feel anxious and mildly paranoid. When affected by cannabis people may think they are having profound ideas or insights.
- Other common immediate effects include increased heart rate, low blood pressure and reddened eyes.

Effects: Higher quantities

Larger doses can cause

- Confusion
- Feelings of excitement
- Restlessness
- Hallucinations
- Anxiety, panic or detachment from reality
- Decreased reaction time
- Paranoia.

Effects: Long-term

Respiratory illness: just like smoking tobacco, smoking cannabis can result in a sore throat, asthma and bronchitis. Cannabis cigarettes have more tar than tobacco, placing cannabis users at increased risk of respiratory illnesses such as lung cancer. The risk is increased because cannabis smokers often inhale deeply and hold the smoke in the lungs for longer to increase the effects of the drug.

Motivation: many regular users, especially young people, have reported that they have less energy and motivation, so school or work performance can suffer. Usually these effects disappear gradually when cannabis use stops.

Brain function: concentration, memory and the ability to learn can all be reduced by regular cannabis use. These effects can last for several months after stopping cannabis use.

Hormones: Cannabis can affect hormone production. Research shows some cannabis users have a lowered sex drive. Irregular menstrual cycles and lowered sperm counts have also been reported.

Immune system: there is some concern that cannabis smoking may impair the functioning of the immune system.

Cannabis and psychosis: It is believed that cannabis use, especially heavy and regular use, may be linked to a condition known as “drug-induced psychosis”, or “cannabis psychosis”. This can last up to a few days. The episodes are often characterised by hallucinations, delusions, memory loss and confusion.

There is some evidence that regular cannabis use increases the likelihood of psychotic symptoms occurring in an individual who is vulnerable due to a personal or family history of mental illness. Cannabis also appears to make psychotic symptoms worse for those with schizophrenia and lowers the chances of recovery from a psychotic episode.

Tolerance and Dependence

Regular cannabis users can develop a mild tolerance to cannabis. This means that they need to use more of the drug to get the same effect.

Dependence on a drug can be psychological, physical or both.

People who are psychologically dependent on cannabis find that using cannabis becomes far more important than other activities in their life. Some people crave the drug and may find it very difficult to stop using it.

Heavy and frequent use of cannabis can cause physical dependence. People who are physically dependent on cannabis find that their body becomes used to functioning with the drug present.

Withdrawal

Physically dependent people may experience withdrawal symptoms as their body readjusts to functioning without the drug.

Cannabis withdrawal symptoms may include sleep disturbance, irritability, loss of appetite and weight loss, nervousness, anxiety, sweating and upset stomach. Sometimes chills, increased body temperature and tremors occur. Withdrawal symptoms usually last for less than a week, although sleep disturbances may persist for longer.

CANNABIS AND THE LAW

Cannabis is illegal throughout Australia. Federal and state laws provide penalties for possession, use, cultivation and sale of cannabis.

Australian laws differ between each state and territory. Penalties range from cautions through to fines and/ or imprisonment in relation to possession and use of cannabis.

In some states, justice options include diverting people from the criminal justice system and into drug treatment and/ or counselling programs. However these harm-minimisation strategies are still legally enforceable and failure to complete mandated drug treatment or counselling programs may result in charges being laid.

CANNABIS AND DRIVING

It is illegal to drive a vehicle while under the influence of cannabis. Cannabis affects coordination, perception, reaction times and can make a person feel sleepy, all of which can affect driving ability. Some States and Territories in Australia have introduced random roadside drug testing for cannabis and other drugs.

