

# **Taking a Closer Look at Cannabis and Your Health**

## *The Short and Long Term Effects*

### **The effects of Cannabis**

The effects of any drug depends on a variety of factors. These include the amount taken, weight of the user, past drug experiences, the method in which it is used and the circumstances in which the drug is taken (the place, feelings of the user, people present, whether alcohol or other drugs and medications are taken at the same time). These factors will vary from person to person and from time to time.

Short term effects of small doses involve the nervous system, the heart and the circulation.

### **The most common short term effects of a small dose of Cannabis are:**

- Impaired balance and coordination;
- A “high” – with a tendency to talk and laugh more than usual;
- Difficulties with memory retention and retrieval;
- An increase in heart rate;
- Decreased inhibitions, such as being more likely to engage in risky behaviour such as unsafe sexual practice, and dangerous driving; and
- If smoked, the effects on the lungs are similar to tobacco smoke. This can make asthma and other respiratory problems worse.

These effects usually lead to feelings of slowing down and drowsiness.

A small number of people who use Cannabis are very sensitive to its effects. The effects can take the form of agitation; anxiety and panic; a sense of loss of control, thoughts, feelings and sensations; feelings of suspiciousness and paranoia. In a situation like this, it is important for people not to be left on their own and be supported and reassured. The effects can last up to 6-8 hours. Medical help should be sought.

### **Short term effects of large doses...**

The most common short term effects of a large dose are:

- Hallucinations;
- Vomiting;
- Feelings of panic or intense anxiety
- Blacking out;
- Changes in perception of time, sound, colour, distance, touch and other sensations;
- Restlessness; and
- Confusion.

### **Long term effects...**

If Cannabis is taken on a regular basis over a long period of time then the following health problems may be experienced:

- Tolerance – more of the drug is needed to produce the same effect;

- Increased risk of damage to lungs and lung functioning;
- A decrease in motivation;
- A decrease in concentration;
- Difficulties with memory and ability to learn new tasks;
- Decreased sex drive;
- Lowered sperm count in men; and
- Irregular menstrual cycles in women.

### **Cannabis & mental illness...**

There is strong and increasing evidence to show that any use of Cannabis by people who have had a nervous breakdown is unwise and should be discouraged. When people are “stoned” they can forget to take their medications and Cannabis makes delusions, mood swings and hallucinations worse. This is especially so with feelings of paranoia. In these cases Cannabis can trigger off further bouts of illness and or destabilize the treatment of illness. More than 50% of people admitted to hospital under detention (against their will) have been using Cannabis which has contributed to their admission.

### **How long do the effects of Cannabis use last?**

- Intoxicating effects occur within seconds to minutes and can last for three hours;
- For larger doses the effects last longer;
- Effects on thinking and co-ordination can last up to 24 hours;
- Short term memory loss can last for a number of weeks; and
- Complete elimination of a single dose can take up to 30 days.

### **Can users become dependent on Cannabis?**

Some regular users can become psychologically dependent on Cannabis. Cannabis becomes so central to the person’s thoughts, emotions and activities that it can be difficult to stop using it.

### **Is Cannabis use &/or possession legal?**

Possessing, using, growing or selling Cannabis is illegal in all states and territories in Australia. Persons unlawfully possessing Cannabis may be charged, fined or imprisoned depending on the type of offence, the amount of drug involved, any prior drug convictions and the law in the specific state or territory.

Driving while under the influence of Cannabis is against the law in some states.

### **What is Cannabis?**

Cannabis is the most common illicit drug used in Australia and is derived from the Indian Hemp plant. Other names for Cannabis include marijuana, hashish (hash), dope, mull, grass, pot, weed, ganja and skunk.

Cannabis is a complex mixture of many compounds of variable concentration.

The main active ingredient in Cannabis is called delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). THC is rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream and taken to the brain, producing a “high” and altering mood and perception.

### **The two main forms of Cannabis are:**

- Marijuana – which consist of dried plant material and is usually smoked in a “joint” or through a bong; and
- Hashish – which is made up of hard chunks of dried Cannabis resin and can be eaten in food such as biscuits and cakes.

Both Marijuana and Hashish can be mixed with tobacco for smoking or added to food.

### **More information & help.**

Your family doctor can provide more information, advice or assistance about Cannabis or they may refer you to other community health centres if necessary.

Information can also be obtained by contacting Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) in your state or territory.

ADIS offer confidential services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for anyone with concerns relating to cannabis, alcohol and other drugs.

<b>ACT</b>	(02) 6205 4545
<b>NSW</b>	(02) 9361 2111 country callers 1800 422 599
<b>NT</b>	(08) 8981 8030 country callers 1800 629 683
<b>QLD</b>	(07) 3236 2414 country callers 1800 177 833
<b>SA</b>	country callers 1300 131 340
<b>TAS</b>	1800 811 994
<b>VIC</b>	(03) 9416 1818 country callers 1800 136 385
<b>WA</b>	(08) 9442 5000 country callers 1800 198 024

In emergency situations contact your doctor, local hospital or ambulance service.