



CANNABIS AND YOU

HSE Edition

Cannabis and You

A bit about this booklet

This booklet is aimed at anyone with a question or concern related to cannabis use. It is not a replacement for professional help, but might help you to start considering your use and how it is impacting on your life. At the end we give options for seeking help. We suggest that you read through the booklet from start to finish.

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1. A CLOSER LOOK AT CANNABIS

Cannabis is an hallucinogenic drug that comes in a few different forms and can be used in a number of ways.

Cannabis can make you feel relaxed; calm; anxious; paranoid; dizzy; nauseous; restless; quiet; talkative; giggly; subdued; sleepy; animated and it causes distorted perceptions.

Cannabis contains dozens of psychoactive chemicals. The most important chemical is THC as it is primarily responsible for the positive and negative effects listed above. Another important chemical is CBD, which appears to have anti-anxiety and anti-psychotic properties.

Types of cannabis

Herbal Cannabis

In Ireland, herbal cannabis or weed is the most commonly used form of cannabis. It is often grown indoors using artificial light and soils. Its leaves and flowers are cultivated and dried. These plants are often artificially altered to produce higher levels of Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the chemical in cannabis that gets you stoned. Another chemical in Cannabis is Cannabidiol (CBD). It is associated with helping people relax and is sometimes reduced in these stronger forms of cannabis. Due to the increase in THC and reduction in CBD, there is an increased risk to the users' mental health when taking these substances. These strong versions of cannabis are sometimes referred to as skunk.

Cannabis Resin

Hash or Resin is a black/brown lump made from the resin of the cannabis plant. It is made by separating the sticky resin from the buds and leaves, drying it and moulding it into blocks. It looks similar to peat briquette and used to be the most common form of the drug.

Cannabis Oil

Cannabis oil is a dark liquid made by separating the resins from the plant material. It is rarely found in Ireland.

Synthetic Cannabinoids

These are man made drugs specifically designed to be copies of cannabis but do not contain THC. They are part of a rapidly evolving market of Psychoactive Substances, the exact contents and effects of which are often unknown.

For more information on Cannabis visit: <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu> or www.drugs.ie.

What influences the effects on the user?

The effects of taking cannabis depends on:

- The amount taken
- The strength and type of cannabis
- The way it is taken (smoked, eaten etc.)
- The mental state of the user
- Whether other substances such as alcohol have also been used
- The expectations and experiences of the user
- The setting of use
- The Law

2. THE IMPACT OF CANNABIS USE

People can have very different reactions to cannabis use.

Sleep

Can cause chronic restlessness and insomnia

Mental Health issues

Memory Problems

Throat

Cannabis burns very hot. It irritates the mouth and throat

Heart

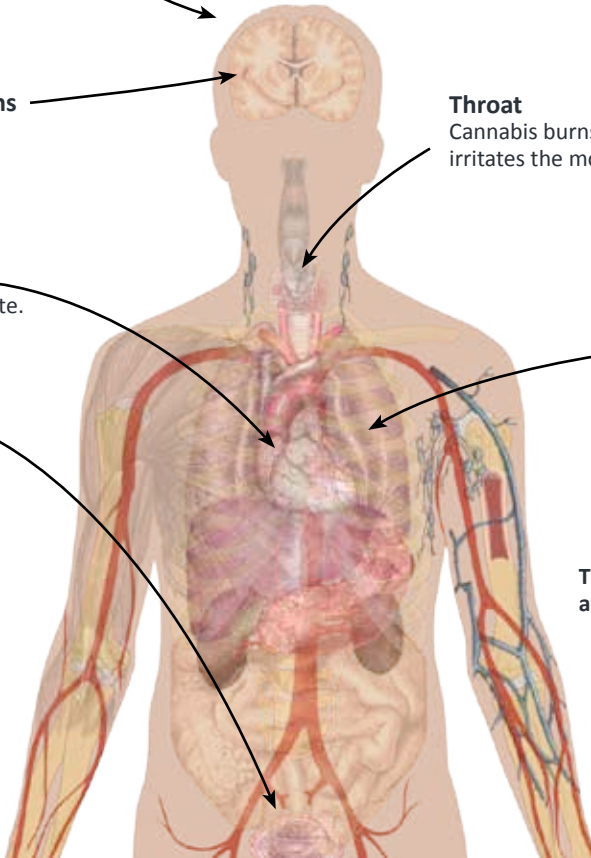
Increase in heart rate.

Lungs

Increased risk of mouth and lung cancer.

Reproduction problems

Thirst and increased appetite.



Short-term effects of cannabis

- Feeling sedated, chilled out and happy
- Feeling sick
- Feeling hungry or getting 'the munchies'
- Heart rate speeds up and blood pressure goes down
- Bloodshot eyes
- Dry mouth
- Tiredness

Long-term effects

- May damage your lungs and lead to breathing problems
- Has been linked with mental health problems, such as depression and schizophrenia
- May lower sperm count and suppress ovulation, so may make getting pregnant more problematic
- Regular use may affect your memory, mood, motivation and ability to learn
- May cause anxiety and 'paranoia'
- May affect coordination and reactions, so you are more at risk of accidents, especially if you use it with alcohol or other drugs

The relationship between cannabis use and mental health problems

Even once off use of cannabis can cause a sense of panic and increased anxiety.

What is known so far?

- Available evidence suggests that people who use cannabis in their teens have an increased risk of developing schizophrenia when compared with non-cannabis users.
- Some people with mental illness use cannabis to relieve their symptoms. It can actually make the condition worse and more difficult to manage in the long term.
- People who use cannabis are more likely than others to experience episodes of depression.
- A heavy session can cause a short-term psychotic episode that can last from several hours to 2-3 days. Many of the people who experience these kinds of episodes are vulnerable to developing a mental health disorder or actively have such a disorder.
- The brain of a person under 21 is still developing. Using hash or weed interferes with the fine tuning of the developing brain.

Having a family history of mental illness increases the likelihood of experiencing negative mental health effects when cannabis is used regularly. Is there a history of mental health problems somewhere in your family?

The Law

Cannabis possession and particularly its supply to others are illegal in the Republic of Ireland. If you are found to have some on you, you may be warned, cautioned or charged with possession of Cannabis under the Misuse of Drugs Act. If you are deemed to have intent to supply others with the drug, you may be charged with that offence.

3. A WORD OF CAUTION

- High strength weed is more dangerous to your mental health than hash.
- Some resins have things added such as bees wax, boot polish, animal excrement, turpentine, ground coffee, milk powder, pine resin, barbiturates, ketamine, aspirin, glues and dyes.
- Damp can cause mould on cannabis, which can be dangerous to the user, when it is smoked or eaten. Fertilisers, pesticides and hormones which are used to increase yield can cause headaches and other side effects.
- Grit weed, where fibre-glass balls are sprayed onto herbal cannabis to increase its weight, can cause serious damage to the users' lungs. It is really hard to detect, but if you rub the bud with a wet finger then put that finger into your mouth you may feel the glass balls grind in your teeth.
- Cannabis does not stay fresh and exposure to air reduces the THC level. As THC breaks down the THC is replaced by CBN (Cannabinol) which leaves users feeling more messed up than stoned. This can also happen when processing herbal cannabis to resin.
- Synthetic cannabinoids may be sprayed onto weed with low natural THC to create the impression that it is more potent. Synthetic cannabinoids seem to cause more mental health problems than natural THC.
- If you are HIV+ or have cancer there may be a risk from fungi or bacteria in cannabis. The best way to combat this is to place your cannabis in an oven heated to 66-93° C for about 10 minutes to kill the fungi or bacteria.

Is one method of using safer than another?

Any smoking is harmful to the lungs, throat and heart but how you use cannabis can influence the levels of harm that you are causing.

Inhaling

Avoid holding smoke in your lungs. You won't get more stoned but you will increase the amount of toxins in your lungs.

Seeds and stems

Throw away the seeds and stems when smoking herbal cannabis as they contain little or no THC and can be harsh on the throat.

Use of tobacco

Avoid mixing cannabis with tobacco. Tobacco is more addictive and exposes you to more tar and carcinogens. Smokers who mix cannabis with tobacco find they are smoking more than they intended because of the addiction to nicotine.

Bongs

A bong or water pipe is seen as less harmful because the water inside the bong cools cannabis which burns very hot. The water in the bong also removes some of the heavy tar elements. Do not use plastic bottles, rubber hoses, plastic stems, drink cans or tin foil as these give off harmful fumes when hot.

Pipes

If you use a pipe, choose one made of glass or stainless steel or brass. Wooden and plastic pipes can give off noxious fumes

Filters

If you are using a piece of cardboard as a 'tip' or 'roach', use unprinted card as print emits toxic fumes

Vaporisers

Using a vaporiser to use cannabis stops you taking in smoke. There are some who believe this is the least harmful way to use cannabis

Eating Cannabis

Some people eat cannabis by mixing it with food or adding it to drinks, to reduce the damage to the lungs. But, this can take longer to take effect and lasts longer, so don't use too much in one session. Never eat uncooked cannabis.

Important things that need to be said:

- *Never use cannabis and drive. It lowers your reaction times and puts you and others at serious risk.*
- *Avoid mixing drugs including alcohol. It makes things more unpredictable.*
- *Using any drug while pregnant can harm the unborn baby.*

4. WHERE ARE YOU WITH YOUR CANNABIS USE?

This is about taking a look at your use, what it is doing for you and how it is impacting on your life.

What does it do for you?

(Circle your top 4)

It is relaxing

It helps when I'm lonely

It improves sex

I feel more confident

It helps me sleep

It helps my creativity

It helps boredom

It eases the pain

I feel I have more fun

I like to feel stoned

It helps me to forget problems

It makes me laugh

It helps me face responsibilities

I feel less nervous & stressed

It's automatic, it's what I do

Reasons for changing

(Circle your top 4)

To start making decisions
To be more productive
To be more relaxed
To have more energy
To show my good qualities
To think more clearly
To improve memory
For my kids
To be stronger emotionally
To have more money
To feel happier
To regain creativity
To feel free to do what I want
To get control of my life
To start making decision
To gain self confidence

Things I would like to avoid.

(Circle your top 4)

Feeling anxious/stressed
Memory loss
Depression
Conflict with people I care about
Legal problems
Poor sleep
Feeling bad about myself
Feeling lazy
Feeling irresponsible
Feeling paranoid
Losing self esteem
Irregular menstrual cycle

So what is your goal?

Is your cannabis use putting you at risk. CUDIT Survey.

Here is a quick, easy and confidential way to find out.

The Cannabis Use Disorder Identification Test - Revised (CUDIT-R)

Have you used any cannabis over the past six months? YES / NO

If YES, please answer the following questions about your cannabis use.

Circle the response that is most correct for you in relation to your cannabis use over the past six months

1.	How often do you use cannabis?	Never 0	Monthly or less 1	2-4 times a month 2	2-3 times a week 3	4 or more times a week 4
2.	How many hours were you "stoned" on a typical day when you had been using cannabis?	Less than 1 0	1 or 2 1	3 or 4 2	5 or 6 3	7 or more 4
3.	How often during the past 6 months did you find that you were not able to stop using cannabis once you had started?	Never 0	Less than monthly 1	Monthly 2	Weekly 3	Daily or almost daily 4
4.	How often during the past 6 months did you fail to do what was normally expected from you because of using cannabis?	Never 0	Less than monthly 1	Monthly 2	Weekly 3	Daily or almost daily 4

5.	How often in the past 6 months have you devoted a great deal of your time to getting, using, or recovering from cannabis?				
	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily
	0	1	2	3	4
6.	How often in the past 6 months have you had a problem with your memory or concentration after using cannabis?				
	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily
	0	1	2	3	4
7.	How often do you use cannabis in situations that could be physically hazardous, such as driving, operating machinery, or caring for children:				
	Never	Less than monthly	Monthly	Weekly	Daily or almost daily
	0	1	2	3	4
8.	Have you ever thought about cutting down, or stopping, your use of cannabis?				
	Never	Yes, but not in the past 6 months			Yes, during the past 6 months
	0	2			4

This scale is in the public domain and is free to use with appropriate citation:

Adamson SJ, Kay-Lambkin FJ, Baker AL, Lewin TJ, Thornton L, Kelly BJ, and Sellman JD. (2010). An Improved Brief Measure of Cannabis Misuse: The Cannabis Use Disorders Identification Test – Revised (CUDIT-R). *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 110:137-143.

Now, add up your scores for all of the 8 questions

Between 1-8 = Low risk.

Between 9 - 16 = Hazardous cannabis use. You are likely to be having cannabis related problems.

17 or over = High level of cannabis use. You are most likely dependant on the drug.

Whatever the results, if you feel uncomfortable about some of your answers, you may want to talk it over with someone.

5. QUITTING V CUTTING DOWN

What can get in the way of your decision to cut down or quit (circle what fits you)

QUITTING MIGHT BE BETTER

Trying to control my use won't work

I have tried cutting down before & it didn't work

I need to stop for health & relationships

My mental health has been affected

I want more control in my life

I am in trouble with the law or have financial problems

CUTTING DOWN MIGHT BE OK IF

I know I am not going to quit

Using will not interfere with my quality of life or well being

My use has benefits that outweigh the consequences

I have no history of mental health problems in my family or myself

My use does not interfere with work, education etc

I can set limits and say no at times

I know it's illegal and costly but am willing to take the risk

Looking at these pros and cons the best decision for me at the moment is to:

Cut down Stop completely

I will start on this day ___/___/___

If cutting down, I will have ___ cannabis free days and not use more than ___ days a week

What can get in the way of your decision to cut down or quit (circle what fits you)

It's a habit that I am used to

My friends all use

It's always on my mind

It's hard to say no

It's easy to get

I don't know what else to do with my time

What are your high risk situations (people, places, or activities) that would make it harder for you? _____

How can you plan to tackle these high risk situations? _____

Staying stopped

Before you stop, plan for how you will deal with cravings. They are like a stray dog, the more you feed them, the more likely they are to come back.

Tips for dealing with cravings

- Delay: If you delay a decision to use for 15 minutes, the craving will probably pass
- Write a list of the good things about not using and the bad side to using and keep it handy for when you have a craving
- Self reinforcement: Remind yourself of your success so far
- Distraction: Do something you enjoy. Keep your mind occupied with something else
- Leave or change the situation
- Call someone
- Remember cravings are normal and will pass

Cutting Down

Tips for cutting down

- Set limits on the day, time and amount that you plan to use
- Plan ahead for particular situations
- To reduce the risk of overdoing it, try to space out the days between using cannabis
- Keep a diary of how much you are using
- Avoid people or places that might lead you to using more than planned
- Find alternatives to using cannabis
- Reward yourself in other ways for not smoking
- Watch your intake of other substances (alcohol & tobacco included)

My own tips for cutting down

6. CANNABIS WITHDRAWAL

Cannabis withdrawals vary from person to person, but usually start on the first day without the drug and most symptoms peak on day 2 or 3. In general, withdrawal symptoms are over after two weeks, but this depends on how dependant someone is on cannabis before they quit. Sleep disturbances are less predictable and can take some time to settle down.

Symptoms of cannabis withdrawal

When people stop using cannabis after prolonged use their symptoms might include: sleep problems such as insomnia and strange dreams; mood swings/irritability; depression; anxiety/nervousness; restlessness/physical tension/ sweating; reduced appetite; nausea; tiredness and headaches.

How can I deal with withdrawal symptoms?

A plan for combating sleep disturbance can make it easier to cope with all of the withdrawal symptoms. These include:

- Have a plan before you stop
- A counsellor may help you to look at managing withdrawal symptoms and preventing relapse.
- A plan for combating sleep disturbance can make it easier to cope with all of the withdrawal symptoms. These include:
 - Cutting back on stimulants such as tea, coffee, sugar and cigarettes especially in the afternoon;
 - Exercising daily especially in the morning;
 - Having good habits for before bedtime (warm bath, hot milk etc)
 - Avoid using alcohol, tablets or other drugs to help you to sleep.
 - Eating healthy foods, rather than sugary or processed foods. If you are not eating much, be sure to drink plenty (water, juices and milk)
 - Herbal sleep remedies are available, but watch for new habit or dependencies.
- If you still feel discomfort after 2 weeks of abstinence from cannabis, you may want to seek the help of a GP or counsellor to discuss strategies to deal with this.

Relaxation

Being able to relax is a skill that can be learned. It can be helpful at any stage of the process of change.

Deep breathing 7/11

From deep in the pit of your stomach breathe in for a quick 7 seconds and then breathe out for 11 seconds. Do this 6 or 7 times and see the reaction. Breathing in triggers one part of our nervous system which creates arousal and breathing out stimulates a relaxation response. By breathing out more than breathing in, you trigger the relaxation response more.

Clenched Fists

This works on the principle that if you tense muscles and then relax them, they are always more relaxed after you have just tensed them.

First make your hands into tight fists, as tight as possible. Notice the tension in the muscles of your fingers. Become aware of the hardness of your fingernails in your palms. Notice the skin stretched across your knuckles.

In a moment begin to relax your hands. When you do, really concentrate on the change between the tension and relaxation. When you are really concentrating, relax those hands and fingers. The relaxed feeling is now going up your arms and shoulders. In a few minutes it will spread to your whole body. Let the relaxation flow.

What helps you to relax? (Yoga, hot bath, a good film, reading, exercise etc)

7. YOUR PERSONAL ACTION PLAN

Making a plan is a way to promote physical and mental health as well as your goal with cannabis.

Remember the following:

- Moderation (don't over do it/ avoid unnecessary stresses)
- Flexibility (review and adapt plans as time goes on. Try to be flexible so that when you meet challenges or have a bad day, guilt or failure don't set you back)
- Routine (Establish healthy habits for sleep, food and exercise. These will help mood, energy and overall health)

What areas do you need to work on further to help you to reach your goal?

Relapse prevention

Coping with stress

Alternative activities

Self-esteem

Exercise

Nutrition

Sleep

Assertiveness

Having fun

Planning your time

Relaxation

Support

Motivation

Relationships

Any other areas that you need to work on? _____

What do I need to work on first? _____

How am I going to do this? _____

Who can help me with this? _____

8. SEEKING HELP

For information and support on cannabis try the following resources:

www.drugs.ie
www.erowid.org
www.ncpic.org.au
www.drugsmeter.com

HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline
(free confidential support and information service)
1800 459 459 or helpline@hse.ie



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Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

