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Cannabis - what does it really do to you?

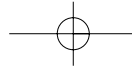


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A YoungMinds Booklet



ABOUT THIS BOOKLET

Cannabis has been in the news a lot lately. Some people seem to reckon that smoking cannabis when you're young means that you'll go mad, whilst others say that having the odd spliff doesn't do anyone any harm. So, what's the truth? This booklet sorts out the facts from the fiction about using cannabis when you're young, so that you've got the right information when deciding whether to use it or not, or how much you want to use. It's based on what scientists and doctors have found out so far about cannabis and young people, and it looks at lots of different areas that can be affected, such as your brain, your mind and your relationships.

It's split up into sections: 🌿 The main things to remember 🌿 What is cannabis? 🌿 But it's legal now, isn't it? 🌿 Why do some people use cannabis? 🌿 Cannabis and mental health 🌿 Does cannabis mess with how you think and function? 🌿 Cannabis and physical health 🌿 Cannabis and friends 🌿 How to cut down or give up cannabis 🌿 Help section

This booklet has been written by people who work for YoungMinds, a charity that's concerned about the mental health of young people. We are not trying to preach, but simply to give you the facts about the subject. The end of the booklet has useful information about where to find out more information, or get advice.

THE MAIN THINGS TO REMEMBER

- 🌿 Cannabis contains various chemicals which can have powerful effects on different areas of the brain and, if used regularly or heavily, may also influence how the brain develops.
- 🌿 Young people use cannabis for many different reasons and can be affected in many different ways.
- 🌿 Young people who use cannabis regularly or heavily may be putting themselves at risk of developing a variety of mental health problems, including serious mental illnesses, such as psychosis.
- 🌿 Young people who already have mental health problems or who have a family history of mental illness may be even more at risk from the negative effects of cannabis.
- 🌿 Cannabis can affect your physical health, particularly as it's so often used with tobacco, which carries well-known risks.
- 🌿 Scientists and doctors are still trying to find out the answers to many questions about the effects of cannabis on young people's physical and mental health.
- 🌿 There are a lot of places that provide confidential information, advice and help for young people who want to know more about cannabis or are worried about the effects.



WHAT IS CANNABIS?

Cannabis is made from a plant called *Cannabis sativa* or *Cannabis indica*. It's got lots of other names; maybe you've heard it called some of these:

pot, skunk, ganja, hash, Soap-bar, marijuana, grass, dope, sensi, shit, herb, bush, puff, Moroccan, draw, weed, gear...

It's also called lots of different things when it's rolled into a cigarette: **spliff, zoot, reefer, joint...**

When you buy it, it might look like leaves, herbs, a dark brown lump (called resin) or a goeoy oil. It can

be smoked with tobacco, on its own, in a pipe, or eaten in food. Skunk is a newer, frequently stronger variety, which is often home-grown. When you buy cannabis, you don't know what strength you are buying, there isn't any quality control, and you don't know if the dealer has put anything else into it.

Whatever you call it, and however you take it, cannabis can really play around with your mind. The chemical that makes people feel stoned or high is called tetra-hydro-cannabinol, or THC and stronger varieties of cannabis, like skunk, have more THC in them.

But would you believe that THC is just one of over 400 chemicals in the drug? When you take it, these chemicals are absorbed into the blood and quickly travel to different parts of the brain which control how your body works, how you feel, how you think and how you behave. Some of the reactions these chemicals cause only last a few minutes or hours. But more and more doctors are now concerned that cannabis can also change how the brain grows and works during the teenage years, and that this can affect how they feel, think and behave for a long time.

BUT IT'S LEGAL NOW, ISN'T IT?

No. Some people think that the law allows personal use of cannabis, but they're wrong. Cannabis is a Class C drug, which means that it is illegal to have any (in legal terms, this is called 'possession') or to sell or give it to others (this is called 'supplying'). If you get caught with cannabis at school, you could be excluded and the school will probably tell your parents, and maybe even the police.



If the police do get told, or if the police catch you with cannabis on you, they can take you to a station for a full search, can inform social or probation services and can arrest you, give you a reprimand, final warning or charge, depending on the seriousness of the offence; they can also keep your name on their records. Following one reprimand, any further offence will lead to a final warning or charge. Any further offence following a warning will normally result in a charge being brought. After a final warning, you risk being referred to a youth offending team for a rehabilitation programme.

Whether or not you get charged with possession of cannabis (if convicted, you'll get a criminal record) will also depend on the circumstances. However, you are much more likely to be arrested and charged if you are caught openly smoking cannabis in the street or other public place (such as a concert, park etc.)

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE USE CANNABIS?

'It helps me chill out when I'm stressed.' Anna, 17

People who take cannabis regularly are usually trying to feel high, to get a buzz, or to just chill out. They sometimes feel that cannabis helps to get rid of painful feelings, worries or bad memories. It may do this for a little while, but it doesn't really help them deal with those problems.

'I want to see the world in a different kind of way.' Dan, 15

Sometimes cannabis causes people to feel confused by what they're seeing or hearing, or even to see or hear things that aren't really there (these are called hallucinations). Although some people get used to and even enjoy these experiences, they can often be quite upsetting and frightening.

'There's nothing else to do, it's something to do with my friends and I don't want to be left out.' Yaz, 13

You might use cannabis for a number of reasons, and like it, but it's important to remember that cannabis might be having a bad effect on you even without you realising it.



CANNABIS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Cannabis and psychosis

Everyone agrees that using cannabis can cause a lot of unusual experiences, some of which doctors refer to as psychotic symptoms. Psychotic symptoms include:

- ✦ Hallucinations (when you hear, see or feel things that are not really there).
- ✦ Strange ideas (when you may believe something that isn't true to most people).
- ✦ Confused thinking, feeling that your emotions are mixed up.

✦ Cannabis use can also lead to feeling very down or high (mood swings).

These experiences usually don't last very long, often just a few hours after using cannabis, and it doesn't mean that you have a serious mental illness if you experience some of these things.

However, scientists have found that some individuals continue to have psychotic symptoms even days or weeks after using cannabis and often they are not in touch with the same reality as everyone else, but don't realise it. Apart from

being distressing for them, their families and friends, having a continuing psychosis (eg schizophrenia) can be troublesome for their lives and can mess up their future plans; it usually needs medical treatment and sometimes admission to hospital. However, schizophrenia is not very common; it usually begins in early adult life and eventually affects about one in every hundred adults in the UK.

Scientists have worked out that if you use cannabis regularly or heavily when you are a teenager, you are increasing your risk of developing a psychosis in comparison

to someone else who doesn't use cannabis. The risk is usually relatively moderate though, and tends to affect a small percentage of people.

In addition to using cannabis during your teens, there are several other things which scientists believe increase the risk even more of developing psychosis or causing serious problems for your mental health:

- ✦ If you are already getting psychotic symptoms.
- ✦ If a family member has a psychosis, in particular



schizophrenia, or has had it in the past.

- ✿ If you are already on anti-psychotic medicines AND use cannabis.
- ✿ If you are using stronger forms of cannabis, like skunk.
- ✿ If you already have mental health problems or problems with your behaviour.

It's worth bearing in mind though that even if none of the above points apply to you, this doesn't mean that smoking cannabis is safe. Researchers are still trying to find out what other things increase

young people's risk of developing a psychosis.

'I was on medication for hearing voices. The doctors said 'Don't smoke dope'... so I went out and smoked dope. I started hearing voices saying I was going to die, and got really confused. I thought I was the lead singer of a band; I wasn't me any more. My mum took me back to the adolescent unit at the hospital. I was stuck like that, hearing things, thinking I was about to be murdered, for 10 weeks.'

Simon, 17

Cannabis and other mental health problems

Scientists and doctors have also found a link between using cannabis regularly when you are a teenager and other mental health problems, like feeling down and hopeless for a lot of the time (depression) or being worried or afraid a lot (anxiety). But scientists don't agree as to whether smoking cannabis actually causes these problems or just makes them worse. For instance, it may be that you would be feeling depressed or anxious even if you weren't smoking cannabis and that although you

started smoking cannabis to make yourself feel better, it could now be making things worse.

For some young people these problems can stick around long after using cannabis and develop into more serious mental health problems which may result in those young people needing help from a mental health professional to get better.



DOES CANNABIS MESS WITH HOW YOU THINK AND FUNCTION?

Some research says that if you use cannabis a lot, it can make it harder for you to pay attention at school and focus on things (even things you enjoy, like computer games) and can make it harder for you to switch off from what's going on around you, and that these effects can be permanent. Difficulties such as the ones mentioned above can make being at school, and learning, more difficult; but the more school you miss, the more you miss out on education,

and this is something which could have a big effect on you.

CANNABIS AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

It's worth knowing that cannabis doesn't only affect your brain - it affects other parts of your body too. Some scientists think that the chemicals in cannabis are even more damaging than cigarettes, and that they increase your risk of getting lung problems such as asthma, bronchitis and cancer, as well as doubling your risk of getting cancer of the head, mouth or neck.

There's also evidence saying you should avoid cannabis if you are pregnant, or think you might be, since it increases the risk of poor growth of the baby and it may also have negative effects on the child even months and years later. Some scientists are also concerned that cannabis has a damaging effect on male fertility.

It's important to remember that, aside from these physical health problems that may be caused by cannabis, smoking cannabis with tobacco (as most people tend to) will put you at increased risk of all the health problems we know are

caused by tobacco use. Research also suggests that people who also smoke cannabis find it harder to give up smoking tobacco.

Cannabis can also be addictive to some people, and then very difficult to give up. Lots of people who try to stop taking it get unpleasant reactions, like feeling angry or anxious and not being able to sleep, and some will need help and support or even specialist treatment to control its use.



CANNABIS AND FRIENDS

Some people really like using cannabis. Some get it whenever they have the money and some even get into debt in order to keep smoking cannabis. Sometimes it can turn into being the only thing they do with friends. It can be the only thing people have in common with each other. It can be hard to go out and do other things if everyone's only together because they're all into cannabis.

'I used to be in this group of friends, but then we fell out. I

became a loner and was left out of everything. Then they let me back into the group and I started smoking spliffs with them... It was my first time. I was glad I was in on it; it made us closer. But in the end, they were just waiting for their mobiles to go all the time so they knew when they would be able to get some more. They got boring, and I went off by myself. I was lonely again to start with, and we all did badly in our exams, but I did make other friends in the end. I'm really glad I made the effort to do my own thing.'

Joel, 17

It can be hard to say to friends that you don't want to use cannabis because you're anxious about your mental health. You may be worried that your friends will tease you. People find it easier to understand physical illness than mental stuff though, so when your friends ask you whether you want some, why not tell them you don't want any because it makes you sick, or because you're allergic to it?

It's also really important to remember that although it might seem to you that everyone's smoking cannabis, the reality is that although around half of young people have tried cannabis 'once', far fewer use it regularly.

If you use cannabis a lot, it can affect your relationships with other people. Things might feel more chilled out with your friends, but more stressful at home.

Worried about yourself, or a friend, who's using cannabis?

'Sometimes I get random voices in my head. I've talked to them speaking out loud.' Sam, 14

When young people are developing psychosis, the early signs are not always so obvious to others. Sometimes, only a young person's

closest friends will have noticed that something's wrong. Some warning signs might be:

- ✦ Losing contact with friends
- ✦ Having weird or unusual thoughts
- ✦ Not wanting to go out or do anything
- ✦ Being suspicious of people
- ✦ Having panic attacks
- ✦ Saying strange things
- ✦ Getting distracted easily

These signs could be a part of being a teenager - but if you think you or a friend are behaving in a more extreme way than most teenagers, it's important to get help early to

stop things becoming more serious. You need to talk to someone you can trust, like a GP or a teacher, or call one of the confidential helplines listed at the end of this booklet. It can be harder to get on with your life if you have started missing too much school or friends have started to drift away.

WHAT IF I WANT TO CUT DOWN OR GIVE IT UP?

Here are some ideas that might help:

- ✦ Plan to have days when you don't use cannabis.
- ✦ If you use it at certain times or places, try to break the pattern so you don't connect the feeling with certain things. So, if you always use it when you're in the park, you connect cannabis with that place and find it hard to think about other things in the park.
- ✦ Try to avoid people who are using it, or want to use it, in front of you.
- ✦ Think of something else you like doing, and try to do that at the time when you want cannabis. So, if you always have some after lunch on a Saturday, try to plan to do other things you like at that time, such as Play Station, watching a DVD, or even taking the dog for a walk... anything really, just to distract you instead.
- ✦ Calculate how much money you spend on cannabis and think about what else you like that you could spend it on. Then buy yourself the treat as a reward.
- ✦ Ask people who aren't using cannabis to help you make changes. It can be hard doing it on your own.

✿ If you smoke tobacco as well as cannabis, try giving up both together: your doctor can advise you about help to stop smoking.

✿ Contact some of the places in the help section at the end of this booklet for more ideas.

What do other people say about giving up?

'Now I've been in hospital three times because of it, I'm definitely not smoking it again. I'm going to meet my mates, have a couple of beers, but I'm back in the real world now and want to stay there.' Jay, 18

'I know some people say it's not addictive, but most people I know who smoke it don't agree. When you come off it I think a lot of the problem is coming off nicotine. That nicotine gum might help.' Satchi, 16

'If you've been doing cannabis for ages, then it's part of your routine; not having cannabis around is going to be hard, but it will get easier as time goes on. You fill your time with other things.' Mark, 17

HELP SECTION

Information for young people seeking help

If you have any worries or concerns about cannabis, you should contact your GP or other healthcare worker. You can also be referred to a specialist who is trained to help young people with problems.

What you talk to your doctor about will be confidential (i.e. they won't tell anyone else what you tell them). But if your health or safety are at **SERIOUS** risk then your doctor may want to tell your parents or carers. You may want to ask your doctor first about this before you say anything, and explain that what you want to say is confidential. If you are nervous, you can always take a friend or someone else you trust with you.

Remember it is important to get help early if you are experiencing any of the symptoms described in this booklet. Delay can make recovery more difficult.

IT MAY HELP TO CONTACT SOME OF THESE PLACES:

Connexions Direct

Tel: 080 800 13-2-19
(7 days a week, 8am-2am)
Text: 07766 4 13-2-19

Textphone: 08000 968 336

www.connexions-direct.com (includes online email service and details of personal advisers in your area).

Connexions Direct can offer you information on a wide range of topics, as well as confidential advice and practical help. Website includes information about health, money, housing, getting legal advice, relationships with family and friends, careers, and learning options.

FRANK

Freephone: 0800 77 66 00 (24-hour service. If you call from a landline the call is free and won't show up on your phone bill. Also provides language interpreting service for non-English speakers.)

Textphone: 0800 917 8765 (24 hours)

Email: frank@talktofrank.com

www.talktofrank.com

See www.talktofrank.com/azofdrugs/frankreports/kickthehabit.aspx for tips about how to give up smoking, which could help you give up cannabis.

Friendly, confidential advice about drugs.

ChildLine

Freepost NATN1111
London E1 6BR

Freephone: 0800 1111 (24 hours)

Textphone: 0800 400 222 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-9.30pm. Weekends 9.30am-8pm)

www.childline.org.uk

ChildLine is the UK's free helpline for children and young people. It provides a confidential telephone counselling service for any child with any problem. It comforts, advises and protects.

www.knowcannabis.org.uk

This website can help you assess your cannabis use, its impact on your life and how to make changes and cut down if you want to.

Giving Up Smoking

NHS Smoking Helpline: 0800 169 0169

www.givingupsmoking.co.uk

Provides advice, information and support if you want to stop smoking.

There4Me

www.there4me.com

For anyone aged 12-16 who has some worries or needs some advice. Provides on-screen advice and an agony aunt to help with any problem. Or talk 1-2-1 in 'real time' with an NSPCC adviser or email for a reply within 24 hours.

Addaction

www.addaction.org.uk

Provides a range of drug and alcohol services for adults and young people.

DrugScope

www.drugscope.org.uk

Provides info on cannabis and other drugs. Drugs information for 11-14 year-olds can also be found at D-World:
www.drugscope.org.uk/dworld

Rethink

www.rethink.org

Website includes information and discussion boards about cannabis and mental health. Rethink provides services for people with severe mental illness and their families and carers.

Children's Legal Centre

www.childrenslegalcentre.com

This website is designed for young people, carers and parents and contains frequently asked questions on legal issues affecting children (eg. child protection, school attendance).

National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)

Helpline: 0800 616 101 (Weekdays 8am-8pm, Saturday 10am-4pm)

Email: help@nyas.net www.nyas.net

Helps you get your voice heard with issues or concerns affecting you e.g. if you have problems with the law or are looked after (in care). Gives you confidential information and advice too.

Need2know

www.need2know.co.uk

A website for teenagers which includes information about health, time out and relationships.

More booklets from YoungMinds you might be interested in:

- ☼ Want to know more about psychosis?
- ☼ Do you ever feel depressed?
- ☼ Adolescent in-patient units - need to know more?
- ☼ Mental illness in your family?

See www.youngminds.org.uk/youngpeople/info.php

Information for parents, carers and adults:

If you are a parent or carer who has concerns about the cannabis use of a young person, please contact the YoungMinds Parents Information Service on **0800 018 2138** (Mon & Fri 10am-1pm, Tues & Thurs 1-4pm, Wed 1-4pm and 6-8pm).

Advice for parents about talking to their children about drugs:

www.talktofrank.com/worriedaboutsomene/parents/1to4.aspx