

THE BASICS

Cannabis

Do you know?

- Cannabis sativa is a plant that contains the drug THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol). It is a unique drug, with effects that include sedation (feeling calm), euphoria (a sense of well-being) and hallucinations. THC's hallucinogenic effects change the way you think, see and hear things.
- Cannabis is used to produce three drug products:
 - Marijuana (pot, weed, grass, dope) consists of the dried leaves and flowers of the plant.
 - Hashish (hash) is made from the dried resin at the top of the plant. It is often brown or black and "chunky" looking.
 - Hash oil is made from hashish. A sticky oil, it can be brown, black, red or clear. It is often placed in small bottles or caps.
- The THC content in today's cannabis products is higher than it was years ago, resulting in a much stronger drug.
- Cannabis products are typically smoked. They can also be eaten.
- After smoking, the effects of THC are felt within a few minutes and usually last from three to four hours. When eaten, the effects may take an hour or more to be felt. THC may continue to affect users the next day.
- THC is stored in fat cells, and the body gets rid of it slowly. As a result, THC may be in the body up to 30 days after stopping use and even longer for frequent users.
- Smoke from a marijuana cigarette contains numerous chemicals, some of which are also found in tobacco smoke and are known to cause cancer.

Is cannabis legal?

Cannabis is an illegal drug in Canada. It is against the law to produce, sell, use or process this substance.

Legislation for decriminalization now being considered will still make possession illegal. However, the penalty for possession for personal use versus trafficking will be a fine rather than jail time.

Short-term Effects

While using a person may experience:

- red eyes & lowered skin temperature
- increased heart rate and blood pressure
- drowsiness, slowed speech
- slow reaction time and poor coordination
- concentration and memory problems
- feelings of extreme pleasure, giggling and laughter
- hearing, seeing and feeling things differently (music may seem more distinct, colours may seem brighter, emotions may seem more intense)
- a strong desire for food
- a feeling that time is going slowly or quickly
- a feeling of being separated from reality and seeing or hearing things that aren't really there
- panicky feelings, or paranoia (feeling scared or suspicious for no reason)
- dizziness or fainting with large, repetitive doses

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Long-term Effects

After heavy use over a long period of time, a person may experience:

- short-term memory problems
- difficulty learning and problem solving
- breathing problems, frequent cough, lung damage, increased risk of cancer
- immune system problems (the body is unable to fight off infections as easily)
- reproductive system problems, such as low sperm counts, impotence in men (the inability to have sexual intercourse), irregular menstrual cycles in women
- fearfulness and anxiety are common after high doses
- decreased motivation, low energy and loss of interest in life

Tolerance and Dependence

- People who use cannabis often and regularly can develop a tolerance, so more is needed to get the same effect.
- Users can become psychologically dependent (feel they need the drug).
- Recent research shows that physical dependence (the body needs the drug) can occur, especially with long term, heavy users.

Withdrawal Symptoms

- Physical withdrawal symptoms can include trouble sleeping, irritability, loss of appetite, restlessness, anxiety, sweating, chills and mild nausea.
- Symptoms are usually fairly mild and may last for up to a week. However, cravings can last longer.
- Overdosing on cannabis is unlikely as long as it has not been mixed with other drugs.

Other Risks

- The use of cannabis by young people may negatively affect the reproductive system (a decrease in sex hormones in boys and menstrual cycle disturbances in girls).
- Cannabis use may be harmful to a developing baby (low birth weight, premature birth, possible learning disabilities).

- People with heart disease or high blood pressure may be at risk for further complications.
- In certain cases, cannabis use may trigger a psychotic episode (a condition in which the person does not know what is real and what is not real).
- People can put themselves in risky situations when on this drug (driving while impaired, having unprotected sex, taking unsafe actions which could cause injury).

REMEMBER: A person's experience with any drug can vary. Here are a few of the many things that may affect the experience: the amount and strength of the drug taken, the setting, a person's mood and expectations before taking the drug, gender, overall health, past experience with that drug and whether more than one drug is being used at the same time. Using alcohol and other drugs at the same time can be dangerous.

Sources and For More Information

ABCs of Cannabis (information sheet), Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, 2000.

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Drugs & Drug Abuse, CAMH, 1998.

Fast Facts on Drugs, AFM, 2004.

Marijuana Information (brochure), Vancouver Island Health Authority.

National Institute on Drug Abuse Website: www.nida.nih.gov

Straight Facts about Drugs and Drug Abuse, Health Canada, 2000.

Street Drugs: A Drug Identification Guide, Publishers Group, LLC, Plymouth, MN, 2005.

For more information or for help with a drug or alcohol problem: Contact your local Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) office or visit the website at www.afm.mb.ca. AFM offers a broad range of prevention and rehabilitation services, including harm reduction and abstinence-based programs for alcohol, other drugs and gambling.

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