

CANNABIS is the most widely used illegal drug in Canada. It is a mood-altering drug that comes from the Cannabis sativa plant. People use it in three forms: as marijuana (the dried leaf of the plant), hashish and hash oil (both from the plant resin).

Marijuana and hashish are usually smoked in cigarettes (called joints or reefers), in cigars (“blunts”), in pipes, or in water pipes (“bongs”). Hash oil is added to marijuana or tobacco cigarettes. Cannabis can also be cooked in foods, for example brownies.

The cannabis “high” comes from the chemical THC (delta-9-tetrahydro-cannabinol). In recent years, new growing methods have produced stronger marijuana. Hashish usually is stronger than marijuana, and hash oil is even stronger.

Short-term effects

- Using cannabis will probably make you feel more relaxed, free and open. Colours will seem brighter, sounds and smells more distinct. Some users feel happy and start talking a lot; others get quiet and withdrawn. Minutes can seem like hours, and ordinary objects seem to have special meaning.
- If you smoke cannabis, you will probably feel the “high” quickly, and it will last two to four hours. If you eat it, the high happens later, and you feel it for a longer time.
- Cannabis makes you clumsier and slow to react. Driving and operating machinery while stoned is not safe, especially if you combine cannabis with other drugs, including alcohol.
- While high on cannabis, you lose some of your ability to learn. You can forget things, and have trouble concentrating — a serious problem for students.
- Some users feel severe anxiety and high doses can cause panic attacks, fearful suspicious feelings (paranoia) and temporary psychosis. These effects usually disappear within hours.
- After very high doses, you might hallucinate, but this is unusual.
- Marijuana can be taken to decrease nausea caused by anti-cancer drugs and increase appetite in people with AIDS. In Canada, it is generally illegal to use marijuana for medical treatment. A few people have been granted permission through Health Canada’s Special Access Program.

Effects of long-term use

Using cannabis heavily for a long time can have serious side effects.

- Cannabis smoke contains cancer-producing chemicals. Smoking cannabis damages the lungs and can lead to chronic coughing and lung infections. People who smoke both marijuana and tobacco may develop lung, neck and head cancers at a younger age than those who smoke only tobacco.
- Many people who use cannabis heavily for a long time have problems with short-term memory, concentration and abstract thinking. Most of these problems disappear after a few weeks without drugs, but some last for years.
- Some heavy cannabis users appear less active and ambitious than other people. We cannot say that cannabis causes this. However, frequent use can make people even less motivated.

Cannabis and pregnancy

Women who use cannabis during pregnancy are more likely to have premature or underweight babies. As the children grow up, they may have some learning and behaviour problems.

Cannabis and addiction

People who use cannabis often may find that they need more and more to get the same effect. Heavy users can become mentally and physically dependent, or addicted to how it makes them feel. They can’t stop using cannabis even when it causes serious problems.

Dependent users who quit may feel mild withdrawal symptoms like troubled sleep, irritability, anxiety, nausea, sweating and loss of appetite. These symptoms usually last less than a week, but craving can last longer.