

# Marijuana



## What is marijuana?

Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal drug in Australia. It is made from the dried flowers and leaves of a plant called *Cannabis Sativa*. Other names for marijuana are cannabis, grass, mull, pot, dope and yarndi.

Marijuana can look like dried herbs or tea. Sometimes it contains seeds or twigs. It can be grey, green or brown in colour.

Marijuana is usually smoked in hand-rolled cigarettes called joints or in water pipes called bongs. Sometimes it is mixed with food, such as cakes and cookies, and eaten.

## What is THC?

THC is the chemical in marijuana which makes you feel *high*. This means you experience a change in mood and may see or feel things in a different way.

Some parts of the plant contain a higher level of THC. For example, the flowers or buds have more THC than the stems or leaves.

## How does THC affect you?

When marijuana is smoked, THC goes quickly into the blood through the lungs. It then goes to the brain and this is when the *high* is felt. This can happen within a few minutes and can last up to five hours from each time the smoke is inhaled.

When marijuana is eaten, THC is absorbed more slowly into the blood as it has to pass through the stomach and intestine. Not only does it take longer to experience the *high* when the drug is used in this way, the effects can also last for much longer, particularly those that are regarded as unpleasant by the user, such as hallucinogenic effects.

THC is absorbed quickly into body fat. It is then released very slowly back into the blood. It can take up to one month for a single dose of THC to fully leave the body.

## Effects

The effects of marijuana will depend on:

- how much you take
- how often you take it
- how strong the marijuana is
- how the marijuana is taken (joint, bong, food)
- your size, weight, health
- your mood
- your experience with marijuana
- your tolerance to marijuana
- whether marijuana is taken with other drugs, such as alcohol, which can increase the effects of both drugs
- whether you are alone or with other people, at home or at a party, etc
- your age – young people are more vulnerable to the negative effects of marijuana.





## Immediate effects

### Small amounts

If you have a small amount of marijuana, the effects can last up to five hours from each exposure. You may:

- feel unusually well and happy
- do or say things which you normally wouldn't, such as risk-taking behaviour like unsafe sex or dangerous driving
- talk and laugh more than usual
- experience anxiety and paranoia
- have bad balance and coordination
- feel drowsy
- find it hard to concentrate
- have problems remembering things
- feel hungry
- experience asthmatic symptoms or have trouble breathing if you smoke marijuana
- have a faster heart rate
- have dry, red eyes
- have a dry mouth and throat
- focus on one particular thing and ignore all other things.

### Large amounts

If you take a large amount of marijuana, you may:

- feel confused
- vomit
- be restless
- experience changes in your perception of time, sound, sight, touch and distance
- feel excited
- see or hear things which are not there (hallucinations)
- feel anxious or panicky
- 'black out'
- feel distant or separate from reality.



Marijuana can also cause problems with:

- remembering things
- thinking clearly
- movement
- ability to do things like drive or operate machines.

These symptoms usually disappear when the effects of marijuana wear off.

## Long-term effects

If you take marijuana regularly over a long period of time then you may experience the following health problems:

- dependence
- increased risk of getting bronchitis, lung cancer and other diseases of the respiratory system
- decreased motivation
- decreased concentration, memory and ability to learn new things
- decreased sex drive
- depression
- psychological effects – this is more likely if the person already has a schizophrenic condition or has a pre-disposition to schizophrenia which can be triggered by marijuana use.

Most people who use illegal drugs, first used drugs like alcohol, tobacco or marijuana. However, most people who use cigarettes, alcohol or marijuana never use other illegal drugs.

Regular marijuana use at a younger age increases the risk of other drug use but only 4 per cent of marijuana users have ever used heroin. The link between marijuana use and the use of other illegal drugs is usually due to the personal traits that make it more likely for the person to take part in risky behaviour.

## Dependence

Physical and psychological dependency on marijuana can develop. This means that you may experience withdrawal symptoms if you stop or suddenly cut down as well as tolerance, meaning you need more of the drug to experience the same effects. Marijuana withdrawal symptoms usually consist of flu-like symptoms such as:

- headaches
- nausea
- irritation
- depression
- trouble sleeping and strange dreams
- anxiety
- poor appetite
- restlessness.



## Mixing marijuana with other drugs

It can be dangerous to mix marijuana with other drugs such as alcohol or prescription drugs. This is because the effects of marijuana and the other drug can become stronger and produce more unpredictable effects than if they were used separately.

There is no evidence that marijuana automatically leads to the use of other drugs.

## Marijuana and pregnancy

It is not wise to use any drugs during pregnancy. THC passes from the mother to the baby through the placenta. There is some evidence that women who smoke marijuana may give birth to smaller babies or have premature deliveries. Other studies show that newborn babies may have trouble sleeping if their mother used marijuana during pregnancy. Also, in the first six months of life, babies who have been exposed to marijuana in-utero are at a greater risk of developing asthma, chest infections and other breathing problems such as wheezing.

## Marijuana and the law

Using marijuana is illegal in Australia. If you use, sell or give marijuana to someone else and get caught, you could face substantial fines and penalties including a prison sentence. This also includes items used to take marijuana such as bongs. In NSW, first time offenders caught carrying a small amount of marijuana may be issued with a formal caution, which can include information about the harms associated with marijuana use and a number to call for drug related information or referral. A person can only receive up to two cautions.

## Marijuana and driving

Marijuana makes it more difficult to drive safely, especially when it is taken with alcohol. It is illegal to drive under the influence of any illicit drugs, including marijuana. If you break this law you could lose your licence for a set time, or be fined or sent to prison.

Since January 2007, police have been conducting random roadside drug testing, and can give any driver a roadside oral drug test. In NSW, if you test positive, you won't be charged immediately but you will be prohibited from driving for 24 hours. The sample is sent to a laboratory and if it tests positive to marijuana or other drugs, you will be charged to appear in court.

Even where random roadside drug testing is not being carried out, if a police officer suspects you have used drugs you could be arrested and taken to a hospital for a blood and urine test. The samples will be sent to a laboratory and if they test positive to marijuana or any other drug (including prescribed drugs), NSW Police will determine whether your driving would have been impaired by your drug use. You will then be charged accordingly.

Anyone under the influence of marijuana, who kills or injures another person while driving a motor vehicle, can be sentenced to a term in prison.





## Information resources

A series of marijuana factsheets are available for free, from the National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre (NCPIC) at:  
<http://ncpic.org.au/workforce/cannabisinfo/factsheets/>

Topics include:

- What is cannabis?
- Cannabis and the law, mental health, potency, driving, dependence, with prescribed medications, aggression, motivation, tobacco use, young people
- Cannabis in the workplace
- Cannabis use and reproduction
- Looking after a friend on cannabis
- Mixing cannabis and alcohol
- People at risk of developing problems with their cannabis use
- Cannabinoids and appetite
- Cannabinoids
- Cannabis contamination.

## Quitting marijuana

If you have been taking marijuana for a long period, you may find it difficult to stop. Some people can stop using in one day while others prefer to stop slowly by taking less marijuana each time. The way you choose to stop is a personal one but there is assistance available:

- The National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre (NCPIC) provides free resources that can be downloaded from its website:
  - *What's the deal on quitting? A do-it-yourself guide for cannabis users*
  - *What's the deal? Cannabis facts for young people*
  - *What's the deal? Cannabis facts for parents*
  - *What's the deal? Talking with a young person about cannabis*
  - *Fast facts on cannabis*
  - *Fast facts on mental health and cannabis.*
- *Mulling it over* is a harm reduction booklet available from the Manly Drug Education and Counselling Centre (MDECC). **Tel.** (02) 9977 0711.
- Counselling for users, concerned relatives and friends is available in some alcohol and other drug agencies, hospitals, community health centres and private clinics. Phone the counselling service in your state or territory for more information.

- Quit smoking marijuana groups are available in some drug and alcohol agencies. These groups are like quit smoking programs. Phone the counselling service in your state or territory for more information.

## Confidential telephone counselling

For help and advice about a marijuana (cannabis) related issue call the free, National Cannabis Information and Helpline on 1800 30 40 50.

## 24 hour service

### NSW

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
**Tel.** (02) 9361 8000 \**Toll free.* 1800 422 599

### Victoria

Direct Line  
**Tel.** (03) 9416 1818 \**Toll free.* 1800 888 236

### Western Australia

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
**Tel.** (08) 9442 5000 \**Toll free.* 1800 198 024

### Queensland

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
**Tel.** (07) 3837 5989 \**Toll free.* 1800 177 833

### South Australia

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
**Tel.** (08) 8363 8618 \**Toll free.* 1300 131 340

### Northern Territory

Amity Community Service  
**Tel.** (08) 8944 6565 \**Toll free.* 1800 684 372  
 Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)  
 \**Toll free.* 1800 131 350

### Tasmania

Alcohol and Drug Information Service  
 \**Toll free.* 1800 811 994

### ACT

Alcohol and Drug Program  
**Tel.** (02) 6207 9977

\* Toll free numbers are only available if you are calling from within that state.

You will find a copy of this sheet at:  
[www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/drugs\\_action/factsheets\\_index.html](http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/drugs_action/factsheets_index.html)

Further copies are available from the Better Health Centre  
**Tel.** (02) 9816 0452 **TTY.** (02) 9391 9900

Other publications in this series include Speed, Alcohol, Hallucinogens, Heroin, Ecstasy, Cocaine and Benzodiazepines.