

Marijuana



What is marijuana?

Marijuana is the most common illegal drug used in Australia. It is made from the dried flowers and leaves of a plant called Cannabis Sativa. Other names for marijuana are 'grass', 'cannabis', '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.

When marijuana is eaten, THC is absorbed more slowly into the blood as it has to pass through the stomach and intestine. It can take up to one hour to experience the 'high' effects and these can last up to 12 hours.

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 strong the marijuana is
- how the marijuana is taken (joint, bong, food)
- your size, weight, health
- your mood
- your experience with marijuana
- whether marijuana is taken with other drugs
- whether you are alone or with other people, at home or at a party.





Immediate effects

Small amounts

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

- feel unusually well and happy
- do or say things which you normally wouldn't
- talk and laugh more than usual
- have bad balance and coordination
- find it hard to concentrate
- feel hungry
- have a faster heart rate
- have red eyes
- focus on one particular thing and ignore all other things.

These effects usually lead to feelings of slowing down and sleepiness.

Large amounts

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

- feel confused
- be restless
- feel excited
- see or hear things which are not there
- feel anxious or panicky
- 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:

- An increase in the risk of getting bronchitis, lung cancer and other diseases of the respiratory system.
- A decrease in motivation.
- A decrease in concentration, memory and ability to learn new things.
- A decrease in sex drive.
- A decrease in sperm-count in men.
- Irregular menstrual cycles in women.
- Some people may have psychological effects. This is more likely if the person already has a schizophrenic condition.

Note. There is no record of any deaths being caused by marijuana.



Mixing marijuana with other drugs

It can be dangerous to mix marijuana with other drugs such as alcohol or other drugs prescribed by doctors. This is because the effects of marijuana can become stronger.

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. Other studies show that new born babies may have trouble sleeping.

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.

However, each state or territory has different laws regarding penalties and criminal conviction. In South Australia and the ACT for example, the personal use of small amounts of marijuana has been decriminalised. In NSW, first time offenders caught carrying a small amount of marijuana may be issued with a formal caution.

Marijuana and driving

Marijuana makes it more difficult to drive safely, especially when it is taken with alcohol. A breathalyser test cannot detect if you have used marijuana. If a police officer suspects marijuana, or other drugs, then you can be arrested and taken to a hospital for a blood and urine test. This will show whether there is THC or any other drug in your body.

It is illegal for anyone to drive while under the influence of any drugs, including marijuana. If you break this law you could lose your licence for a set time, or be fined or sent to prison.

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.



Dependence

Physical dependency on marijuana can develop. This means that you may experience withdrawal symptoms if you stop or suddenly cut down. Marijuana withdrawal symptoms usually consist of flu-like symptoms such as:

- headaches
- nausea
- irritation
- depression.



Information and advice



Stopping marijuana

If you have been taking marijuana for a long period then 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, including:

- *A guide to quitting marijuana* is a self-help booklet available from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre in Sydney. Tel. (02) 9398 9333.
- *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 telephone 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 telephone counselling service in your state or territory for more information.

24 hour confidential telephone counselling 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) 3236 2414
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) 8981 8030
Toll free. 1800 629 683

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
Toll free. 1800 131 350

Tasmania

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
Tel. (03) 9416 1818
Toll free. 1800 811 994

ACT

Alcohol and Drug Program
Tel. (02) 6205 4545

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

The information in this document can be accessed through the NSW Health website: www.health.nsw.gov.au

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.

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