

Facts about Cannabis

Pot, marijuana, weed, dope, grass, mull, dak, hash, smoke, buds, skunk, cabbage, ganja, reefer

Cannabis is the most popular and commonly used illegal drug in New Zealand though is increasingly being used legally for medicinal purposes. Cannabis comes from the Cannabis Sativa plant and can be used in a dried plant, resin, or oil form. The potency of cannabis depends on the concentration of THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), which is higher in resin and oil than in the dried plant.

What cannabis does

Cannabis is a Central Nervous System (CNS) depressant; this doesn't mean it makes us depressed – rather, that it slows brain activity. It can also have stimulant and hallucinogenic effects. The effects which can last 3-4 hours or more depend significantly on how it is used, how much is used, the strength of THC as well as the user's previous experience of the drug and their mood.

In small doses cannabis relaxes the user and instils a feeling of wellbeing however it may also be difficult to concentrate and can impair balance and co-ordination. People commonly have bloodshot eyes and 'get the munchies' (increased appetite).

Harms associated with cannabis

- Taken in large or strong doses cannabis can affect people's perception of time, slowing down reaction times, which is why it's not a good idea to drive when stoned
- Cannabis burns at a higher temperature than tobacco so taking deep tokes and holding the smoke harms the lungs
- Smoking cannabis, especially when combined with tobacco, comes with extensive and long-term risks for lung and heart disease
- Sharing equipment like bongos, pipes etc increases the risk of sharing saliva-borne viruses like influenza, cold sores and meningitis
- Frequent cannabis users report physical problems including lack of energy, skin problems and weight loss as well as psychological problems such as anxiety, strange thoughts and depression¹
- Cannabis use can affect motivation, learning and memory so can affect productivity and education
- The illegal status of cannabis has led to thousands of Kiwis having criminal records which can affect life opportunities such as overseas travel
- THC is absorbed and stored in our body's fat deposits where it is released very slowly back into the bloodstream. It can take up to 6 weeks to fully eliminate from the body which is why people get caught by drug tests even though it may be some time since they have used cannabis

¹ Wilkins, Girling, Sweetsur and Butler 2005

People at greater risk of harm

Medical researchers suggest certain groups of people should be especially careful about using cannabis, these include:

- Adolescents as their brains and hormonal systems are still developing
- People with epilepsy as they can experience seizures after cannabis use
- Anyone who is pregnant as THC can cross the placental membrane so has the potential to affect the fetus
- People with a history of mental health issues as cannabis use can trigger schizophrenia in people who are vulnerable to it. If having delusional thoughts or other distorted sensory experiences when not stoned see your doctor or contact CADS.

Tolerance and dependence

Tolerance refers to the body's process of getting used to cannabis so more is needed to get the same effects you once did. This can be particularly problematic for people using cannabis for medical reasons. Fortunately, resetting tolerance is as simple as taking some time off from using which can also improve memory, concentration and mental clarity.

People can become psychologically dependent on cannabis, with heavy or frequent users experiencing withdrawal symptoms including disturbed sleep, irritability and flu-like symptoms. While withdrawal from cannabis can be uncomfortable it is seldom medically serious.

CADS can help if you find it difficult to stop or control your cannabis use.

Harm reduction tips

- No use is the safest option. If you choose to use cannabis then moderate occasional use is safer than continual heavy use
- Replace bong water each time to avoid bugs and bacteria
- Cannabis strength varies significantly so try a small amount of any new smoke first
- There is no need to take deep tokes and hold the smoke which harms the lungs. To minimise lung damage:
- avoid mixing cannabis with tobacco
- avoid spotting which can be especially harsh on the lungs
- Using iced water with a bong or pipe reduces damage from unfiltered hot smoke. Ensure droplets of water do not come up as well. However, using bongs can increase the area of the lung reached by the smoke so increased potential lung damage
- Avoid inhaling deeply
- Avoid using cannabis to deal with life's problems or unpleasant feelings as it can make things even worse or stop you getting things sorted
- If a friend is freaking out reassure them and get them to focus on relaxing their breathing

Looking for help?

If you're just looking for information or maybe want to talk with someone about an alcohol issue for yourself or someone close to you then call **Auckland CADS** on **0800 845 1818**

Use your first aid skills and CALL for an ambulance (111) if you are concerned about a person's wellbeing.

Other services

Alcohol drug helpline: Phone 0800 787 797 or free txt 8681 and they will txt you back for a free, confidential conversation

Health Promotion Agency: For information on standard drinks, the law, alcohol and your kids, or to see if your drinking's ok go to <https://www.hpa.org.nz/programme/alcohol>