

ASSIST DRUG INFORMATION CARD

CANNABIS

Street names

Marijuana, pot, grass, weed, mull, dope, hydro, bush, skunk, ganja, yandji, hash, bongs, billys, joints, spliffs, kronic/spice (synthetic cannabis varieties).

What is it?

Cannabis is made from the dried flowering heads (flowers) and leaves of a plant called Cannabis Sativa. The drug is classified as a cannabinoid having both depressant and hallucinogenic effects on the central nervous system.

The main ingredient in cannabis which makes people feel stoned or high (or sometimes anxious or paranoid) is called delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol or THC.

What does it look like?

The main form of cannabis available on the black market in Australia is the dried flowers (heads/buds) of the female cannabis plant. Hash (dried cannabis resin), hash oil (thick oily liquid) and cannabis edibles (chocolate, lollies, drinks) contain higher concentrations of THC and are rarely found here.

How is it usually taken?

Cannabis is typically smoked in a joint (rolled cigarette) or water pipe (bong). Many cannabis smokers in Australia mix tobacco with their cannabis to make it go further, which contributes to its harms. The drug can also be vaporised (which heats the cannabis through combustion rather than burning it). Sometimes people will infuse butter with cannabis and eat it in cakes and cookies.

When cannabis is eaten it is less harmful for the airways and often results in a more intensive and longer lasting effect. Eating cannabis can result in very unpleasant mental health effects (particularly anxiety and paranoia) especially if people consume too much.

Immediate effects

When cannabis is smoked (or vaped) the effects come on almost immediately because it is absorbed quickly through the lungs to the blood stream, and then on to the brain where it binds to specific receptors. When

cannabis is eaten it can take up to an hour before people feel its effects because it needs to be absorbed through the digestive system before it enters the blood stream and brain – the effects can last up to 12 hours if its eaten.

The effect of cannabis varies between individuals - including their mood, expectations, and their previous experience with the drug.

The effects of cannabis last for 2-4 hours if its smoked/ vaped and may include:

- A feeling of being 'stoned'— relaxed, euphoric and uninhibited
- Enhanced sensory perceptions, particularly enjoying food, music and sex
- Feelings of hunger (having 'the munchies')
- Panic reactions, confusion and feelings of paranoia
- Nausea, headaches and reddened eyes
- Increased heart rate for up to three hours after smoking
- Dizziness, with impaired balance and coordination.

Long-term effects

Ongoing heavy use of cannabis may increase the risk of:

- Developing cannabis dependence – around 1 in 10 people who use cannabis are likely to become dependent
- Upper respiratory tract cancers, chronic bronchitis and permanent damage to the airways when smoked (particularly when smoked with tobacco)
- Impaired concentration, memory and learning
- Cardiovascular system damage (heart and circulation)
- Experiencing negative mental health effects.



Mixing cannabis with other drugs

Cannabis is commonly smoked with tobacco. Some cannabis smokers become dependent on tobacco through mixing the two drugs together.

Combining cannabis with alcohol and other drugs (including over the counter and prescription drugs) can lead to unpredictable and dangerous effects. Many people who try cannabis for the first time after drinking alcohol may experience a 'green out' and become very intoxicated and feel anxious, paranoid, sick and maybe even vomit.

There have been no overdose deaths associated with smoking cannabis. However, many people have reported feeling very unwell if they eat too much cannabis in cakes, cookies, etc.

Other things to consider:

- Cannabis use can have serious consequences for those with a family history of schizophrenia and increases the risk of episodes of psychosis
- Heavy use of cannabis before the age of 15 has been linked to many adverse outcomes including earlier onset of psychosis, dropping out of school, becoming dependent on the drug (1 in 5) and attempting suicide
- Traces of cannabis can be found in urine for 1-5 days after occasional use and up to 6 weeks (or more) in people who use cannabis regularly (more than 3 times a week, over a number of years)
- Cannabis is not 'better' than tobacco - it contains 3 x more tar and 5 times more carbon dioxide than a standard cigarette
- Many long term cannabis users will experience withdrawal from the drug when they stop using it. The main symptoms include anger, irritability, anxiety, decreased appetite, sleeplessness, strange dreams and night sweats – these symptoms can last for 1-2 weeks although sleep problems can last a few months

Harm reduction advice

Many of the harms associated with cannabis result from smoking the drug. While research is still inconclusive about the harms of vaping cannabis, most harm reduction advice suggests that this is a safer way of inhaling the drug.

Some tips for reducing harm:

- Eat cannabis rather than smoke it – but be careful with the dose
- Avoid using bongs because they deliver greater concentrations of tar and people generally inhale cannabis more deeply and hold it in the lungs for longer
- Don't hold the smoke in your lungs – within 1-2 seconds you receive 95% of the THC
- Don't mix tobacco with your cannabis (use a herbal mix/tea instead)
- A joint with a 'tip' (long cardboard filter) or a pipe is better than a bong
- Don't drive or operate machinery when stoned
- Don't use cannabis if you have a genetic predisposition or family history of mental illness especially schizophrenia
- Give yourself a break if you are becoming tolerant to the effects
- Don't 'wake and bake' (smoke upon waking)
- If a daily smoker try delaying your first bong/ joint of the day as long as possible