

Fact Sheet

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What is Marijuana?

Marijuana is a mixture of dried, shredded flowers and leaves of the hemp plant (*Cannabis Sativa*). It's also called, among other names, pot, dope, weed, grass, ganja and chronic. There are more than 200 slang terms for marijuana.

Sinsemilla, hashish and hash oil are stronger forms of marijuana which come from the same plant.

The main ingredient, and the main cause of intoxication, is Tetra hydrocannabinol (THC). Hashish (hash) is made from the concentrated resin, or sap, of the hemp plant. Its THC content is higher than marijuana. It's generally smoked from a pipe or bong but can also be added to a joint or a regular cigarette. The THC content in marijuana has been increasing since the 1970's.

What Does Marijuana Do to the Body?

All forms of marijuana are mind-altering. That is, they change how the brain works. Marijuana's effects on the user depend on its strength or potency, which is related to the amount of THC it contains.

Marijuana affects the central nervous system as a hallucinogen and as a depressant. THC is rapidly absorbed by fatty tissues in various organs. You then feel "high" which can range from feelings of calm and happiness to feeling silly and giddy or paranoid and anxious. When taking high doses, it's possible to experience hallucinations. The "high" usually lasts for 2-4 hours, but your perceptions can be affected for many hours afterwards, even when you no longer feel "high".

Generally traces of TCH can be detected by standard urine testing methods several days after a smoking session. However, in chronic heavy users, traces can sometimes be detected for weeks after they have stopped using marijuana.

Short-Term Effects

Marijuana affects people in different ways depending on:

- User's previous experience
- How strong the marijuana is (how much THC it has)
- How the marijuana is taken
- What the user expects to happen
- Where the drug is used
- Whether the user is drinking alcohol or using other drugs

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Short-Term Effects (con't)

Possible side-effects are:

- altered perception of time, distance, space, sights, sounds and touch
- impaired judgment and decision making
- loss of coordination and slowed reaction time
- disorientation
- red eye
- dry mouth and throat
- increased appetite (“the munchies”)
- sleepiness
- racing heart rate
- may suffer feelings of anxiety and have paranoid thoughts or temporary psychosis
- problems with memory and learning
- trouble thinking and problem solving

The effects are greater when mixed with alcohol or other drugs.

Long-Term Effects

Regular use of marijuana can cause:

- **Increase risk of cancer.** The amount of tar, carbon monoxide, and cancer causing chemicals inhaled in marijuana smoke are three to five times greater than that inhaled from the same amount of tobacco smoke.
- **Damage to lungs and airways.** Just like cigarette smokers, people who smoke marijuana often develop breathing problems – coughing, wheezing. They tend to have more chest colds as non-users and are at greater risk of getting lung infections like pneumonia.
- **Weakened immune system.** Studies have shown that THC can damage the immune system – the cells and tissues in the body that help protect against disease. When the immune cells are weakened, you are more likely to get sick.
- **Difficulty remembering things and concentrating.**
- **Lack of motivation.** You could lose interest in school, work and activities that you enjoy.
- **Risk of mental health problems** – depression, anxiety, schizophrenia
- **Risk of addiction.** Today, more teens enter treatment for marijuana dependency than for all other illicit drugs combined.

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Marijuana and the Brain

Heavy or daily use of marijuana affects the parts of the brain that control memory, attention, and learning. A working short-term memory is needed to learn and perform tasks that call for more than one or two steps.

Smoking marijuana causes some changes in the brain that are like those caused by cocaine, heroin and alcohol. Scientists are still learning about the many ways that marijuana can affect the brain.

Marijuana and driving

Marijuana and driving do not mix. It has serious harmful effects on the skills required to drive safely: alertness, concentration, coordination, and reaction time. Marijuana use can make it difficult to judge distances and react to signals and sounds on the road. The effects on driving can last for at least four to six hours after smoking a single joint.

Studies have shown that while smoking marijuana, people have shown the same lack of coordination on standard “drunk driver” tests as do people who have had too much to drink.

What are the Risks?

- Can decrease your performance in sports as timing, movements, and coordination are all affected by the THC in marijuana.
- You could do things that embarrass you or even hurt you such as driving under the influence or engaging in risky sexual behaviours leading to sexually transmitted diseases.
- You could lose interest in how you look and how you do in school or work.
- Risk of getting in trouble with the law.
- Weekly marijuana use can double the risk of depression later in life. The risk is even higher for girls; female marijuana users are five times more likely to be depressed at 21 than non-users.
- Teens age 12 to 17 who smoke marijuana weekly are three times more likely than non-users to have thoughts about committing suicide.

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What are the Risks? (con't)

- Marijuana use is also linked to an increase in panic attacks.
- Marijuana use during adolescence can increase the chance of schizophrenia. The risk of developing schizophrenia is greater with users who begin at an early age.
- The earlier teens start using marijuana, the more likely they are to become dependant later in life.
- Using marijuana regularly can lead to using drugs as a main way of coping with life, making it more likely that the user will use other drugs.
- Using marijuana while you are pregnant can cause premature births and children may develop learning problems as they get older.

Addiction

Marijuana use can lead to addiction in some people. Unfortunately, there's no way to predict who is at risk. If addicted, people cannot control their urges to seek out and use marijuana, even though it negatively affects their family relationships, school performance, and recreational activities.

Regular marijuana users can develop tolerance, which means they need more of the drug to feel the same effects.

People can experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop using marijuana. They include sweating, shaking, upset stomach, loss of appetite and trouble sleeping.