



CANNABIS – THE FACTS FOR PARENTS

You may have heard a variety of claims about cannabis in the media or in everyday conversation. For instance, you may have heard that cannabis use causes cancer or leads to mental health problems. You may also have heard that the risk of developing cancer is low for cannabis smokers and that it can help relieve anxiety and help reduce pain. This leaflet aims to give you the facts, and advice on what to do if you think your child is using cannabis.

What is cannabis?

Cannabis is the scientific name for the hemp plant. There are many different kinds of cannabis, including stronger varieties usually called ‘skunk’. The leaves and flowers of each kind produce varying mind-altering and medicinal effects when smoked or consumed. THC (tetra hydro cannabinol) is the chemical in cannabis which creates the “high”. It’s also known as marijuana, hash, dope, weed, and has many other names. Its potency is higher than ever: reports show that the THC content in marijuana, both recreational and medical, has risen markedly, whereas cannabidiol (CBD), which many say has therapeutic value, has declined over the last few decades.

How is cannabis taken?

Cannabis is usually smoked in hand rolled cigarettes called “joints” or “spliffs” or in water pipes called “bongs”. When smoked, THC gets into the blood quickly, creating an immediate high which can last for some hours.

It can also be eaten when mixed with other food. When it’s eaten as a cake, the THC is absorbed more slowly, so the high is not as immediate, but the effects can last much longer.

What should you look for?

Occasional use can be very difficult to detect but those who are using cannabis on a regular basis could change their behaviour such as -

- Losing interest in their appearance or personal hygiene
- Dramatic mood swings, excessive tiredness and a lack of appetite
- Sudden changes in established friendship groups
- Taking time off school
- Dilated pupils, red eyes, bad skin
- Spending, stealing or borrowing money, together with a refusal to explain how/why
- Losing interest in hobbies, sports or other favourite activities

However, many teenagers experience behavioural changes for reasons that have nothing to do with substance misuse, so it is really important to be mindful of this, without jumping to conclusions.

What are the effects of taking cannabis?

The effects of cannabis will depend on several factors, such as how much and how often it is taken, how it is taken, the strength of the cannabis, plus the size, weight, and importantly age of the person taking the cannabis.

Immediate effects

If you take cannabis, some of the immediate effects on you may be to:

- 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 cannabis
- 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
- feel confused
- vomit
- be restless
- experience change 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



Long-term effects

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

- 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 cannabis use

Cannabis can also cause problems with:

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

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

Will taking cannabis lead to further drug use?

Regular cannabis use at a younger age can increase the risk of other drug use. The link between cannabis 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.

Research shows that 10% of regular cannabis users become dependent on it (*NHS choices*). Your risk of getting addicted is higher if you start using it in your teens or use it every day.

The risks

- Cannabis is often rolled and smoked with tobacco, which increases the health risks and can lead to nicotine addiction and diseases associated with smoking such as lung cancer.
- Unlike adults, the teen brain is actively developing until the mid 20s. Research shows that cannabis use can have permanent effects on the developing brain when use begins in adolescence, especially with regular or heavy use (*National Institute on Drug Abuse*).
- Mental health issues such as schizophrenia, especially if cannabis use starts at a young age.
- Cannabis is a class B drug, which means that the penalties are an unlimited fine or up to 5 years imprisonment or both for possession and an unlimited fine or 14 years or both for possession with intent to supply.

Responding to your child's Cannabis use

If you believe that your child has taken or is using cannabis, the first thing to do is stay calm. It's important not to let your concerns break the trust you have with your child.

Stay calm - Yelling and making threats will not help the situation. If anything, "having a go" at your child may make things worse. It may give your child another reason to hide things from you. Think twice about secretly searching your children's rooms for drugs.

Talk to your child - Many parents will not feel confident in talking to their children about cannabis, and not knowing enough can make it easier to say nothing. However, talking about it early makes it more likely that your child will come to you if there is ever a problem.

Show that their health, safety and wellbeing are the most important things.

Listen to their feelings and opinions and share yours so they understand your views. Knowing the basic facts and understanding common risks associated with drugs misuse should help communication, enabling you to feel more confident about supporting your child to make healthy choices and stay safe. Avoid scare tactics - teenage children often know more about drugs than you do, so telling them that "smoking cannabis will kill you" might be counterproductive. It might be better to say that smoking cannabis can cause mental health issues.

Learn why your child is using - Find out what led them to try cannabis in the first place. Was it down to "peer pressure" and they wanted to fit in? Was it for the "buzz" that comes from getting high? Was it boredom or curiosity? Was it because they wanted a way to escape? Was it to manage symptoms of anxiety or other mental health problems? If that's the case, you might want to consider seeking help from a mental health professional. It may also be helpful to find out how often your child uses cannabis.

Where to get help

Advice and support is available for both your child and you.

For your child –

Your child's GP

Compass REACH - Free help, advice and support for Young people aged from 9 to 19 across North Yorkshire affected by substance misuse, poor sexual health and issues relating to emotional wellbeing and mental health.
Freephone: 0800 0087452 | Email: NYRBS@compass-uk.org | Website: www.compass-uk.org

North Yorkshire Horizons - Harrogate

Provides one to one support for those with drug and alcohol issues above the age of 18.
Phone: 01723 330 730 | Email: info@nyhorizons.org.uk | Website: www.nyhorizons.org.uk

FRANK - The Talk to Frank service provides information about drugs and advice for drugs users.

Helpline number: 0300 123 66 00 | Website: www.talktofrank.com

Healthy Child Service - Can provide information, awareness and education about substance and alcohol use in young people aged 5-19.

Phone: 01423 557711 | Email: hhc-tr.5-19admin@nhs.net

For you, your family and friends –

Your GP

Drugfam - Drugfam offers phone and email support to people affected by other people's drug or alcohol misuse.

Helpline number: 0300 888 3853 | Email: office@drugfam.co.uk | Website: www.drugfam.co.uk

Families Anonymous - Runs local support groups for family and friends of people with a drug problem.

Helpline number: 0845 1200 660 | Website: www.famanon.org.uk

Release - Provides free legal advice on drug issues.

Helpline: 020 7324 2989 | Email: ask@release.org.uk | Website: www.release.org.uk

Hit - Provides publications and resources covering drugs information.

Phone: 0844 4120972 | Email: stuff@hit.org.uk | Website: www.hit.org.uk



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