

# Cannabis (marijuana)

## What is cannabis?

*Cannabis* is a drug that comes from a plant called *Cannabis sativa* or the Indian hemp plant. It contains a chemical called *tetrahydrocannabinol*, which makes people get 'high'. It is commonly called *marijuana*, *grass*, *pot*, *dope*, *hash* or *hashish*. Other slang terms are *Acapulco Gold*, *ganga*, *herb*, *J*, *jay*, *hay*, *joint*, *reefer*, *weed*, *locoweed*, *smoke*, *tea*, *stick*, *Mary Jane* and *Panama Red*. Marijuana comes from the leaves, while hashish is the concentrated form of the resinous substances from the head of the female plant and can be very strong (it comes as a resin or oil).

## Is cannabis a new drug?

No. It is a very old drug and was used as a herbal medicine by the Chinese about 5000 years ago.

## What are the effects of taking cannabis?

This depends on how much is taken, how it is taken, how often, whether it is used with other drugs and also on the particular person. The effects vary from person to person.

### Effects of a small to moderate amount

- feeling of well-being and relaxation
- decreased inhibitions
- woozy, floating feeling
- lethargy and sleepiness
- talkativeness and tendency to laugh a lot
- red nose, gritty eyes and dry mouth
- unusual perception of sounds and colour
- increased appetite
- loss of concentration
- looking 'spaced out' or drunk
- difficulty remembering things
- lack of co-ordination
- delusions and hallucinations (more likely with larger doses)

The effects of smoking marijuana appear in up to 20 minutes and usually last 2-5 hours, followed by drowsiness.

With larger doses, feelings of confusion, restlessness, excitement, anxiety or panic usually develop.

## What happens with dependence and long-term use?

'Pot' has a severe effect on personality and drive. People using it lose their energy, initiative and enterprise. They become bored, inert, apathetic and careless. A serious effect of

smoking 'pot' is the inability to concentrate and to learn and the loss of memory.

Other serious problems are:

- deterioration of academic or job performance
- respiratory disease, especially bronchitis (more potent than nicotine for lung disease)
- often a prelude to taking hard drugs
- becoming psychotic (resembling schizophrenia)
- impaired ability to drive a car and operate machinery

## What are the withdrawal effects?

The withdrawal usually starts 12 hours or so after stopping using cannabis. The effects are usually mild and over within a few days in most people. It is more severe in habitual users. Some of the withdrawal symptoms are:

- irritability
- nervousness (anxiety)
- feelings of depression
- sleep disturbances
- increased sweating
- tremors
- muscle twitching
- restlessness
- nausea and other gastric disturbances

## Does cannabis improve one's sex life?

No—quite the opposite. Although one feels less inhibited, it tends to decrease libido. Long-term use suppresses sex hormones, decreases fertility and may result in impotence and loss of normal sex drive.

## What about driving under the influence?

It is unsafe to drive after using cannabis.

Cannabis affects co-ordination and perception, and so it is dangerous to drive a car or ride a motorbike after using it. In an experiment, several people were given 'pot' to smoke and then asked to drive around a test circuit. Most made a mess of their driving, including crashing into posts and retaining walls. It is particularly dangerous when mixed with alcohol. Activities such as surfing, waterskiing and motorbike riding are also dangerous.

## What is the management?

The best treatment is prevention. People should either not use it or limit it to experimentation. If it is used, people should be prepared to 'sleep it off' and not drive.