

CANNABIS

So ... a question.

If a drug comes from a plant is it potentially less harmful?

All drug use comes with risk and can cause harm regardless of how it's made or where it comes from, so just because something comes from a plant doesn't mean it's safe.

Let's have a closer look at cannabis.

WHAT'S CANNABIS?

Cannabis comes from Indian hemp plants. Its scientific name is *Cannabis sativa*. Delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC for short, is the psychoactive ingredient of the plant. THC has both depressant (which means the nerve messages to and from the brain are slowed down) and mild hallucinogenic effects. It's therefore classified as a multi-action drug.

Cannabis is known by many names including marijuana, or weed, grass, mull, dope and gunja. It's usually smoked or eaten and comes in three different forms; the most common being the dried part of the plant which is smoked in a hand rolled cigarette called a joint or used in smoking implements such as bongos, pipes, shishas and hookahs.

The dried plant resin, known as hashish, is usually mixed with tobacco or added to foods and baked, for example, in cookies and brownies.

Finally, hash oil is a liquid which is usually added to the tip of a cigarette and smoked.

SO HOW CAN THIS DRUG AFFECT YOU AND YOUR BODY?

A small dose can slow down or depress the central nervous system or CNS. The effects may be felt immediately if smoked or within an hour or two if eaten, and produce mild euphoria, relaxation, impaired balance and coordination. You might also experience a loss of concentration, an increased appetite and bloodshot eyes. Even in small amounts it's possible that some people may develop mental health conditions, have problems with their memory, experience mood swings or panic attacks. Although rare in some people it can also cause a serious psychotic episode.

In a larger dose the drug can cause hallucinations making you see and hear things that are not there. It can also cause a change in your perception of time, colour, distance or touch and cause paranoia and feelings of anxiety.

In the longer term you may have an increased risk of bronchitis and lung cancer, especially if smoked with tobacco, lack of motivation and memory loss. You can even experience a lowered sex drive and hormone production.

These potential harms increase the earlier you start and the more you use. There is no known safe level of cannabis use.

When you smoke cannabis the effects can last for between two and four hours. When eaten, such as in a cookie, the effects may last for between four and seven hours. Why is this? Well, THC and its metabolites are highly fat-soluble. This means that they may be stored and accumulated in the fatty tissues of the body (including the brain). They are then gradually released over time before being cleared from the body. So, what does this mean?

It means that compounds may be detectable in very small amounts in fatty tissues for more than 28 days after use. Therefore, it can be detected in a random drug test a long time after it has been used which can have implications for people driving, applying for jobs or wanting to play professional sports. It also means that when you are ingesting cannabis you may not feel the effects straight away as the drug has to be processed by the gut and therefore you may take more.

WHAT'S THE LAW SAY?

Cannabis is a prohibited substance in WA. This means it's illegal to:

- possess or use cannabis
- sell or offer to sell cannabis
- supply (give) someone cannabis
- manufacture or prepare cannabis for use
- cultivate (grow) cannabis
- cultivate cannabis with intent to sell or supply.



It's also illegal to have in your possession anything that is used in connection with manufacturing, preparing or smoking cannabis eg bong, pipes, scales, etc. In WA it's also illegal to display drug paraphernalia for sale in a shop or sell it.

Although cannabis has been decriminalised in WA, which means there are reduced criminal penalties, it does not mean it's legal. The laws for cannabis are also different in different states and territories, so this can affect the consequences that can occur for a young person.

WHAT ARE THE PENALTIES?

In WA, the penalties for drug offences are different for people under or over 18 years of age.

If you are over the age of 14 and found with 10 grams or less of cannabis or a smoking implement with traces of cannabis and you have no previous drug convictions, the WA Police may issue you with a Cannabis Intervention Requirement or CIR. This requires you to complete a cannabis information session. If you are under 18, you are eligible to be given a CIR on two separate occasions. After this a young person would be referred to a juvenile justice team under the *Young Offender's Act 1994*.

Drug penalties do exist. People can end up with a criminal record which can affect them getting a job, credit, passport or visas for overseas travel.

A NOTE ABOUT MEDICINAL CANNABIS

Medicinal cannabis is cannabis prepared from crude or raw cannabis and prescribed to relieve the symptoms of a medical condition (Department of Health, n.d.; Alcohol and Drug Foundation, 2018). Chemists modify the active components of cannabis to maximise the therapeutic benefit and minimise the side effects. Creating these "pharmaceutical preparations, such as a tablet, capsule or spray, mean that the dose and strength of the preparation can be controlled and standardised" (Department of Health, n.d., para 5). Research is still ongoing to determine the benefits of medicinal cannabis however there has been some success for symptom relief for cancer patients including using medicinal cannabis as an appetite stimulant and to relieve the nausea and vomiting experienced by cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy (Department of Health, n.d.)

In 2016 it became legal for an authorised specialist doctor to prescribe, and a pharmacist to dispense, medicinal cannabis in WA.

Let's wrap this up with the three key messages.

1. Even though cannabis comes from a plant it still can cause harms.
2. Cannabis can cause short and long-term effects on your body's physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing.
3. In WA, it's illegal to possess, use, manufacture, cultivate or supply an illicit drug including cannabis or have in your possession anything that is used in connection with manufacturing, preparing or smoking a prohibited drug or plant.



NEED HELP?

If you or anyone you know is experiencing a drug use issue, contact WA's 24hr Drug and Alcohol Support Line.

- Metro (08) 9442 5000
- Country 1800 198 024
- Emergency 000

Live chat with a qualified and experienced drug counsellor is also offered at:
<http://drugaware.com.au>

REFERENCES

Alcohol and Drug Foundation. (2018). *Medicinal cannabis*. Retrieved from <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/medical-cannabis/>

Department of Health Western Australia. (n.d). Cannabis. Retrieved from http://healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Cannabis