



# MI Fact Sheet Series

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING MENTAL ILLNESS

## Cannabis and psychosis

Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in Australia. Research suggests around 39 percent of the Australian population have tried cannabis. This percentage is increasing among younger age groups. There is evidence that the strength of cannabis and its active ingredient, THC, has increased over the past 30 years.

Cannabis use has harmful effects for all users, especially in the long term. But the consequences of cannabis use can be much more severe for those people who have a predisposition to mental illness. Cannabis use can trigger psychotic symptoms, bring on the start of serious mental illness and worsen the symptoms of people who have mental illness. Drug use in general impedes recovery from a mental illness.

Because cannabis use is so widespread, especially among younger Australians, it is often viewed as being the cause of major mental illness, such as schizophrenia, but there is no conclusive evidence to support this. Cannabis can trigger an episode of psychosis or trigger a mental illness in someone who is predisposed at an earlier stage than it would otherwise have developed in the absence of drug use.

### What is cannabis?

- Products of the cannabis sativa plant. THC (delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol) is the active chemical found in cannabis.

### What are the different forms of cannabis?

- Hash oil – a thick oily liquid that can be extracted from hashish. It is usually spread on the tip or paper of cigarettes and then smoked. The most powerful form of cannabis and rarely found in Australia. THC is 40 percent.
- Hash – dried cannabis resin. Ranges in colour from brown to nearly black. Hash is added to tobacco and smoked or baked and eaten in foods such as cookies. THC is 20 percent.

- Heads – flowers/buds of the plant. Next most potent part of the plant. THC is 15-20 percent.
- Leaf – leaves on the plant. Not very potent and generally not used on their own. THC is two to five percent.

### How is cannabis used?

- Joint (marijuana cigarette)
- Bong
- Cooked in foods and eaten.

### How many people use cannabis?

- Of a study done in 1998, 39 percent of the Australian population have tried cannabis at some time in their lives
- Among people under 35 years of age, 50 percent of people had tried cannabis and 28 percent had used it in the last year
- 37 percent of secondary students had used at some time in their life.

### What are the immediate effects of cannabis?

- Relaxation and loss of inhibition
- Increased appetite
- Affected perception
- Less co-ordination
- Thinking and memory affected
- Increased heart rate, low blood pressure, faintness, blood-shot eyes, dilated pupils
- Larger doses – confusion, restlessness, feelings of excitement, hallucinations, anxiety, panic, detachment from reality, decreased reaction time, paranoia, drug-induced psychosis
- Effects last about two to three hours after smoking.

### What are the long-term effects of cannabis?

- Respiratory illness
- Less motivation
- Impaired concentration, memory and ability to learn
- Impaired hormone functioning – lower sex drive, irregular menstrual cycles and lowered sperm counts
- Can trigger a mental illness in people who are predisposed
- Family/relationship problems
- Work/school problems.

### Is cannabis addictive?

Yes. Regular cannabis users can develop a tolerance to cannabis meaning that they need more and more to get the same effect.

People can become psychologically dependent on cannabis meaning that cannabis becomes far more important than other activities in their life. Cannabis becomes part of their lifestyle (eg reducing stress, increasing relaxation).

Heavy and frequent cannabis use can cause physical dependence where the body becomes used to functioning with the drug present.

### What are the withdrawal effects of cannabis?

- Sleep disturbance
- Irritability
- Loss of appetite and consequent weight loss
- Nervousness
- Anxiety
- Sweating and upset stomach
- Sometimes chills, increased body temperature and tremors can occur
- Withdrawal symptoms usually last less than a week but sleep disturbances may last longer.

## Interaction between cannabis and psychosis

Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in Australia, so it is worth noting elements that are typical of cannabis-induced psychosis.

- Cannabis initially calms
- Makes the positive symptoms of psychosis worse after it begins to wear off
- Higher rate of hospitalisation
- Treatment is generally less effective
- Lowers the chance of recovery from a psychotic episode.

## Why do people with a mental illness use cannabis?

People with a mental illness who use cannabis use it for the same reasons that other people use cannabis, for the perceived benefits. People generally use drugs:

- to feel relaxed
- to cope with boredom
- to feel better or different
- for social reasons, eg to gain acceptance from one's peer group.

For people predisposed to or with a mental illness, the harmful consequences of drug use can be much more immediate and severe than the harmful consequences for people without a mental illness.

## What are the symptoms of substance-induced psychosis?

- Prominent hallucinations or delusions that are the direct physiological effect of a substance and are more real than those sometimes associated with substance use
- Usually, the person does not realise that the hallucinations are related to the substance use

- The symptoms begin during or within a month of substance intoxication or withdrawal and persist as long as the substance use and/or withdrawal continues
- The person remains vulnerable to further episodes of psychosis
- Substance-induced psychosis may look the same as the acute phase of psychotic disorders, but the duration of the symptoms is usually shorter
- In order to receive a diagnosis of substance-induced psychosis, the symptoms must be linked causally to the drug use. Otherwise, a diagnosis of first-episode psychosis (called schizophreniform psychosis) will be given.

## What can family and friends do?

People with a mental illness who use cannabis are severely impairing their chances of recovery. They are likely to exacerbate their symptoms and will limit the effectiveness of any treatment.

Family members can help the situation by:

- Learning more about drugs and their different effects and learning more about effective interventions for problematic drug users eg stages of change and the process it takes for someone to change their drug behaviour.
- Setting limits on the person's behaviour. Eg. Parents might prohibit the smoking of cannabis anywhere in the family home. Siblings may decide not to smoke cannabis with their brother or sister who has a mental illness. While setting limits is likely to cause some initial anger, it might also minimise the damage done by the drug in the long term.
- Learn to better read the symptoms of drug use so that interventions can be more considered and timely.

## Useful references

Australian Drug Foundation  
[www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au)

Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre  
[www.turningpoint.org.au](http://www.turningpoint.org.au)  
DirectLine 24/7 1800 888 236

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia  
[www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au](http://www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au)

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria  
[www.mifellowship.org](http://www.mifellowship.org)

Mental Health Services Website (Vic)  
[www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth)

National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (USA)  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

Mental Health Council of Australia  
[www.mhca.com.au](http://www.mhca.com.au)

SANE Australia  
[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

Beyond Blue  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Family Drug and Alcohol  
24 hour Helpline  
1300 660 068

## Mental Illness Fellowship Australia fact sheets

Understanding psychosis

Understanding dual diagnosis

Family and carer supports and services

What can friends and family do to help a person experiencing mental illness?

Substance use: stages of change model



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08 8221 5072  
[www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au](http://www.mifellowshipaustralia.org.au)

Mental Illness Fellowship of  
Sth Australia Inc  
08 8221 5160 [www.mifsa.org.au](http://www.mifsa.org.au)

NT Assoc of Relatives & Friends of the  
Mentally Ill Inc (NT ARAFMI)  
08 8948 1051 [www.ntarafmi.org.au](http://www.ntarafmi.org.au)

Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc  
02 9879 2600 [www.sfnsw.org.au](http://www.sfnsw.org.au)



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07 4725 3664 [www.mifnq.org.au](http://www.mifnq.org.au)

Schizophrenia Fellowship of Qld Inc  
07 3358 4424 [www.sfq.org.au](http://www.sfq.org.au)

Mental Illness Fellowship of WA Inc  
08 9228 0200 [www.mifwa.com](http://www.mifwa.com)

Canberra Schizophrenia Fellowship Inc  
02 6205 1349