

FACT SHEET TWENTY NINE

CANNABIS

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis is obtained in a number of forms from the naturally occurring plant *Cannabis sativa*, it is the most commonly used illegal substance in the UK. Hash, the brown / black resin form of the drug, is scraped or rubbed from the dry plant before being pressed into “squidgy” or solid blocks. The herb like form, weed or grass, is from the dried leaves of the plant, a stronger form of which is cultivated in Holland and the UK. The dark, sticky Cannabis oil is made by slowly passing a solvent through the resin.

Cannabis is usually smoked with tobacco, in a hand rolled cigarette called a “joint”, although grass can be smoked without it. Some people inhale the smoke through home made apparatus called “bongs”, and it can also be smoked in a pipe, eaten in food i.e. “Hash cakes” or drunk like teas as an infusion. Cannabis is known by a number of other street names (some of which are type-specific) including Bhang, black, blast, blow, blunts, bob hope, bush, dope, ganga, hashish, hemp, marijuana, pot, puff, northern lights, sensi, sensemilla, skunk, smoke, solid, spliff, wacky backy and zero.

The effects experienced with cannabis depend upon the type or form of the drug and the amount that is used as well as how it is taken. The effects of cannabis can start a few minutes after the smoke from the drug is inhaled and last for several hours, if eaten or drunk these effects take longer to start but may be prolonged.

The Effects of Cannabis

The effects of cannabis can significantly dependant on the users mood but can also be determined by the type, the amount and the strength of the drug and how it is used. Cannabis is regularly taken for relaxation, giving the person a feeling of contentedness and peace, its mild sedative effect causes some users to become quiet and subdued whilst others become deeply reflective or introspective. Some cannabis users become giggly or talkative and others report experiencing a heightened sense of feeling, mild hallucinogenic properties are also reported allowing the user to perceive colours or music with more clarity and definition.

The current debate about whether to allow cannabis to be available on prescription is due to its pain relieving properties.

The Short Term Side Effects of Cannabis

Whilst under the influence of cannabis, users can experience

- Problems with co-ordination, which is a risk factor for accidental injuries especially if driving or operating machinery

- Loss of inhibitions, leading to an increase in risk taking behaviour such as unsafe sex or taking other drugs
- Short term memory problems which may lead to disorientation and confusion
- Paranoia, panic and anxiety especially if they are in an unknown or threatening environment or are already feeling anxious. These side effects are also experienced with stronger forms or higher doses of the drug
- “The munchies”, a strong desire to eat or cravings for certain foods.
- Feelings of nausea, sickness or dizziness
- Heavy sedation and users may pass out
- Red eyes and dry mouth in regular cannabis smokers
- Unpleasant reactions or prolonged effects due to taking more of the drug because of the delayed “hit” when cannabis is eaten or drank.
- Excessive sedation if taken in combination with alcohol or other sedative / depressive drugs

The Medium - Long Term Side Effects of Cannabis

The majority of long-term harm associated with cannabis is because of smoking it, and users may become addicted to tobacco as well as suffer from lung complaints such as bronchitis, heart and circulation problems and cancer (cannabis is more carcinogenic than tobacco). Using cannabis can also make other medical conditions worse, such as asthma, heart disease and high blood pressure.

Heavy use of cannabis has been linked to medium and long-term problems with anxiety and depression and has also been shown to induce psychotic states in some people. Recent research has also uncovered a link between cannabis use and schizophrenia. Regular heavy use affects mental ability including concentration and can make people feel tired and unmotivated all the time, affecting their performance at work or at school, college or university.

Although physical dependence is unlikely with cannabis, psychological dependency can occur, many users find it difficult to quit and may not be able to relax or get through a whole day without it.

Other Risk Factors

Cannabis should not be taken when pregnant, evidence suggests that babies born to mothers who used cannabis during their pregnancy were lower in birth weight and experienced developmental problems.

A person with a family history of mental illness should not use cannabis as it may exacerbate or bring on an existing mental health problem as well as lead to other long-term mental health problems.

Cannabis can affect fertility by reducing the males sperm count as well as reducing ovulation in females.