

Omar's story

// I love smoking cannabis. It's what I do at the end of the day – some people have a glass of wine after work, but I like to have a joint or two – I reckon it's less harmful than alcohol. It's good stress relief. The only downside for me at the moment is that I seem to get lots more colds and coughs than I used to. I worry that this is from the smoking. //



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Cannabis

Facts about



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Cannabis is the most recognizable and commonly used illicit drug in Australia. Its use has a long history and is regularly referenced in popular culture. World-wide, there has been a gradual shift in attitudes towards cannabis, with a number of countries legalizing it for use as a medicine and some areas legalizing recreational use. In 2016, Victoria became the first Australian state to legalise the use of medicinal cannabis.

Like other depressants, cannabis slows the functioning of the central nervous system. Many people who use it say they like the way it relaxes them, but high doses of THC (the main psychoactive component in cannabis) can have a hallucinogenic effect. Cannabinoids have been linked to both the alleviation and exacerbation of mental health issues, including paranoia, anxiety, and depression.

Some people report that they experience symptoms of psychosis when using cannabis (e.g. hearing and seeing things that aren't there, believing things that aren't true). For most people, these symptoms go away when the effects wear off, but some people go on to develop mental health problems. Evidence suggests that, for those who are already at risk of mental illness (e.g. if there is a history of it in your family), cannabis use can increase that risk. There seems to be a link between the age you start using cannabis and the onset of mental illness. The younger cannabis use commences, the greater the risk. Studies have also suggested that cannabis use by young people may alter the normal brain development process.

Reducing the harms

The best way of making sure you don't suffer negative consequences from cannabis is to not use it, but many people continue to use cannabis for a variety of medical and recreational reasons. If you do decide to use cannabis, here are some ways you can reduce the harm:

- Smoking cannabis can cause respiratory illnesses (similar to smoking tobacco). Vaporizers are an alternative to smoking, and release THC from the cannabis without burning it – this avoids exposing your throat and lungs to toxic smoke.
- If you do decide to smoke cannabis, don't mix it with tobacco – smoke it in a pipe or as a single paper joint. Don't use cigarette filters, as they filter out up to 60% of the THC in the smoke, which may mean you need to smoke a lot more to get the desired effect.
- Many people use a bong, saying the cooler smoke doesn't feel as harsh, but research suggests that this may be one of the most harmful ways to use cannabis. If you do use a bong, don't hold the smoke in – around 95% of the THC is absorbed within seconds of inhalation, so you don't need to. Regularly clean the water pipe and replace the water, as unclean water is a breeding ground for germs. Keep the water level at least 20cm below the rim of the mouthpiece, as water vapor accumulating in the lungs can cause lung infections. Use a screen in the cone or down pipe to prevent inhalation of small particles and contamination of the water.
- If using a pipe, it is better to use one made out of glass or stainless steel, as toxic fumes can be released when wood, aluminum or plastic are heated.
- Eating cannabis is another way to avoid the harms associated with smoking it. However, it is harder to know how much you have taken, and it can take an hour or two to feel the effects. This can lead to people thinking it's not working and eating more, then feeling the effects more intensely when they finally hit.

Synthetic cannabis

Synthetic cannabis isn't really a form of cannabis at all, but actually the umbrella term for a number of new psychoactive substances developed to mimic some of the effects of cannabis. With brands including Kronic, Spice & K2, these drugs were widely available in Australian shops until most states banned their sale. Their current legal status is complex, varying in each state and for each substance, as new variations are produced to try and keep ahead of bans imposed.

Although synthetic cannabis products promise to mimic the effects of cannabis, don't be fooled into thinking they are a similar substance. Most synthetic cannabis products contain a blend of chemicals that have been sprayed onto herbs. Unlike cannabis, which has been used by humans worldwide for thousands of years and has had a great deal written and researched about its effects and potential harms, synthetic cannabis substances are generally new and untested, and their effects are unpredictable.

The main difference between cannabis and synthetic cannabis is that there have been several reports of overdose linked to the use of synthetic cannabis. Symptoms have included confusion, agitation, vomiting and seizures. Seek medical help immediately if you experience any of these symptoms whilst using synthetic cannabis (or other synthetics) – you may be overdosing.

Reducing the harms – synthetic cannabis

If you decide to use synthetic cannabis the following may help to reduce the harms:

- Don't use on your own – either use with experienced users or people who are not using when you are.
- Use a small amount at first. Be aware that different synthetic brands may differ in strength (or contents) and may have different effects.