

fast facts on
mental health
+
Cannabis

what is cannabis?

Cannabis is the general name for products derived from the plant *Cannabis sativa*. It is by far the most widely used illegal drug in Australia. The main ingredient in cannabis which causes the 'high' is delta-9 tetrahydro-cannabinol, commonly known as THC.

There are a range of risks associated with the use of cannabis. It is the drug's effects on mental health however that attracts the most attention and public concern, particularly in relation to young people.

what do we know about cannabis and mental health?

Cannabis has a range of mental health effects on users. Some experience very unpleasant psychological effects when they use cannabis, like severe anxiety or panic reactions. At high doses users may hear voices or see/taste/smell things that are not really there (hallucinations), or have beliefs that are not true (delusions). These symptoms are more likely to be felt by people who are not used to the effects of cannabis or who have smoked more than they usually do. These experiences do not usually last after the effects of the drug wear off, but can be very frightening, and may be enough to put some people off using again.

Some people appear to be more vulnerable to the mental health effects of cannabis than others, particularly younger people and those with a family history of mental health problems.

can cannabis cause psychosis?

Psychosis refers to a group of mental illnesses where people experience difficulty in distinguishing between what is real and what is not. Someone suffering from a psychosis may experience hallucinations or delusions. These are usually accompanied by confused thinking and speech, making it difficult for others to understand them and therefore limiting their ability to function in life. Schizophrenia is the best known psychotic illness.

Psychotic symptoms can last from several hours up to 2-3 days, with disturbances in thinking, emotions and behaviour. This is uncommon and the symptoms, although frightening at the time, usually go away if use of cannabis is stopped. Cannabis may also trigger a similar psychotic experience or 'episode' in people with a personal or family history of schizophrenia.



can cannabis cause schizophrenia?

Evidence suggests that using cannabis may trigger schizophrenia in those who are already at risk of developing the disorder, and they may experience psychosis earlier. Those with a vulnerability to develop schizophrenia, such as having a family history of the illness, are strongly advised against using cannabis for this reason.

Cannabis has been clearly shown to make psychotic symptoms worse in people who already have a psychotic disorder. In fact, research shows that people with schizophrenia who continue to use cannabis experience more psychotic symptoms (such as hallucinations and/or delusions) and require more frequent and prolonged hospitalisations than those who do not use cannabis, especially when their use is heavy.

Cannabis use is also associated with another serious mental health problem called bipolar affective disorder.

can cannabis cause depression?

The link between cannabis and depression is not clear cut. However, people who do use cannabis are more likely than others to experience depression. There does seem to be a link between early and regular cannabis use and later depression, with young women more likely to be affected. Some people use cannabis to help them feel less depressed or get to sleep. This is not recommended and can make things worse.

can cannabis cause anxiety?

Anxiety and panic attacks are among the most common negative reactions to cannabis reported by users. Some people, however, use the drug in a belief it will relieve their anxiety, but find that it usually makes it worse in the long run.

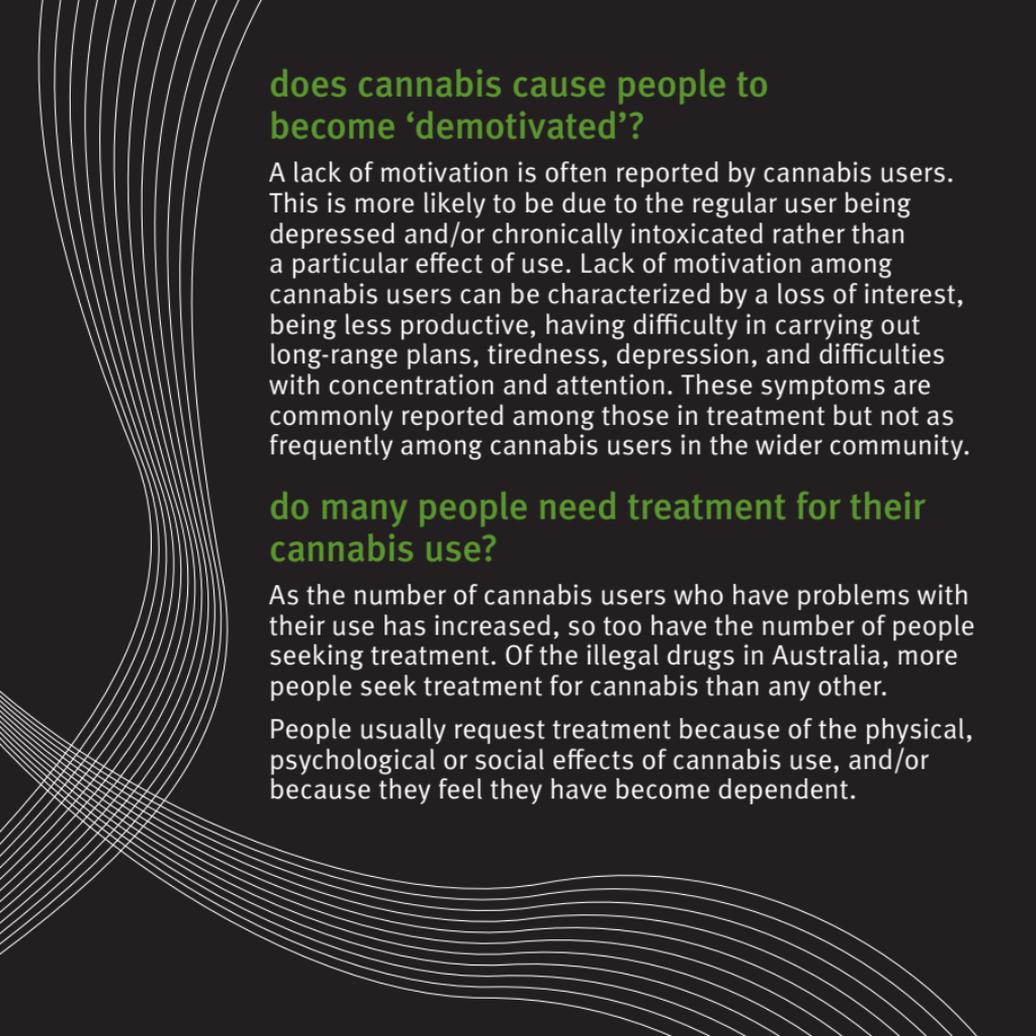
There is a lack of evidence pointing to cannabis as an important risk factor for chronic anxiety disorders such as panic disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder.

is there a link between cannabis use by young people and suicide?

Heavy cannabis use is believed to be one of many factors that place a person at risk of suicide. Other factors include personal and family history of mental health problems, social disadvantage and alcohol use.

can cannabis cause violence?

Cannabis is less likely to cause violence than other drugs such as alcohol or amphetamines. Cannabis users who commit violent acts typically have a history of violence before they first use the drug. During cannabis withdrawal it is common to experience some irritability, which, if not adequately managed, can be associated with aggression.

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does cannabis cause people to become ‘demotivated’?

A lack of motivation is often reported by cannabis users. This is more likely to be due to the regular user being depressed and/or chronically intoxicated rather than a particular effect of use. Lack of motivation among cannabis users can be characterized by a loss of interest, being less productive, having difficulty in carrying out long-range plans, tiredness, depression, and difficulties with concentration and attention. These symptoms are commonly reported among those in treatment but not as frequently among cannabis users in the wider community.

do many people need treatment for their cannabis use?

As the number of cannabis users who have problems with their use has increased, so too have the number of people seeking treatment. Of the illegal drugs in Australia, more people seek treatment for cannabis than any other.

People usually request treatment because of the physical, psychological or social effects of cannabis use, and/or because they feel they have become dependent.

what treatment is available?

Treatment usually involves counselling and in some cases medication may be prescribed. A good place to start is to visit your GP who can help you develop a mental health care plan. Rebates for services provided by health care professionals may be available.

is there anything you can do if you have a family history of mental illness?

If you are aware that you have a family history of mental illness it is important that you avoid using cannabis. Since cannabis is widely used and people are starting to use it at a younger age, it is extremely important, especially for young people, to have some knowledge of their family health history.

Having a family history of mental illness does not necessarily mean a person is going to develop a problem, but knowing one's family history might be a way to avoid an early onset or even unnecessary onset of a mental illness. It might make people who know they may be at higher risk of developing a problem stop and think before they choose to use, or at least choose to use in a less risky way and keep their use to a minimum instead of making it a daily habit.

if I know someone who has a problem with cannabis, or I need help myself, where can I go?

The Cannabis Information and Helpline provides a nationally available free call service for people who use cannabis themselves or those concerned about the cannabis use of a friend or family member. Callers will receive reliable, evidence-based information, support and advice about how to communicate with users and help engage them in interventions.

the cannabis information and helpline is

1800 30 40 50

the ncpic website is

www.ncpic.org.au