

# cannabis or marijuana?

## what's in a name?

Cannabis is known by many names, often depending upon where one lives and with which cultural group one identifies. Some of those names may include marijuana, grass, pot, dope, Mary Jane, hooch, weed, hash, joints, brew, reefers, cones, smoke, mull, buddha, ganga, hydro, yarndi, heads and green.

The agreed international term is 'cannabis', hence its use in global legal instruments such as the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. In the US however, the terms 'marihuana' or 'marijuana' are more likely to be used, particularly in relation to laws, e.g. the Controlled Substances Act. The spelling 'marihuana' continues to be used in that country due to the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937. Marihuana was the spelling most commonly used in Federal Government documents at that time and to stay consistent with past legislation, it continues to be spelled in that way in some congressional bills such as HR 3037, the Industrial Hemp Farming Act of 2005.

NCPIC acknowledges that it is important that correct terminology is used when discussing illicit drugs. The use of street terms and slang add to the confusion that already exists around illicit substances. Although cannabis and marijuana have been used interchangeably for many years, the Australian Standard Classification of Drugs of Concern does not include the term marijuana. When the Australian Government developed a National Cannabis Strategy and subsequently funded the development of a national centre to deal with cannabis-related issues, there were a number of important reasons that the term 'cannabis' was favoured over that of 'marijuana'.

## the cannabis plant

Cannabis is a genus of flowering plants that includes a number of species including *Cannabis sativa*. There is no plant named 'marijuana', so from a botanical point of view, 'cannabis' is the correct term.

Cannabis is used in three main forms: herbal, hashish and hash oil. Marijuana is a term used to describe the dried flowers and leaves of the cannabis plant. Although the least potent of all the cannabis products, it is usually smoked and is the most widely available and most usually used. The other two products are not as popular and are much less likely to be currently used in Australia. Hashish is made from the resin (a secreted gum) of the cannabis plant. It is dried and pressed into small blocks and smoked. Like the dried flowers and leaves, it can also be added to food and eaten. Hash oil, the most potent cannabis product, is a thick oil obtained from hashish. It is also smoked.

Marijuana therefore is a term used to describe only one of the cannabis products available and therefore is not inclusive of all products in the class.

## where does the term 'marijuana' come from?

Cannabis is a term that can be traced back to very early times and variations of the word can be found in the Greek, Persian and Hebrew languages.

Marijuana on the other hand is a comparatively new term. Even so, there is still a great deal of debate about where the word originated. Although it has been said that it could be derived from the Mexican military slang words for ‘Mary and Jane’ (‘María Juana’ meaning a prostitute or brothel); it is more likely that it originated from either the Portuguese word *marigu-ano* meaning ‘intoxicant’, or from the Mexican Spanish *marihuana* or *mariguana*. This in turn may have derived from *mallihuan*, a word meaning ‘prisoner’, originating from the Nahuatl people of central Mexico. Whatever its origins, the term appeared to be in everyday use in Mexico by 1900 and started to begin to be used in the US around that time.

As has already been discussed, the wording used in the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937 in the US continues to impact upon the terminology used today. This bill legitimised the use of the term ‘marihuana’ as a label for cannabis plants and products, including hemp. Prior to this time it would appear that ‘marihuana/marijuana’ were purely slang terms and there is no evidence of them being included in any official dictionaries.

In the years leading up to the tax act being passed, there was considerable concern regarding the illegal immigration of Mexicans into the US. It was often claimed that the Mexicans trying to enter the country were in possession of cannabis which they called marihuana. Fear in the southern border states resulted in new laws, and consequently illegal immigrants, as well as US citizens, could now be arrested for possession of cannabis.

## other countries’ experiences

Almost all countries around the world, with the exception of the US, use the term cannabis to refer to the range of products derived from the cannabis plant.

As already mentioned, this is mainly due to the range of global legal instruments that use the term. For example, the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, one of three major drug control treaties currently in force, has 170 countries as signatories. In that document there is no mention of the word marijuana, while ‘cannabis plant’ is listed in the document’s definition pages as ‘meaning any plant of the genus *Cannabis*’.

Unfortunately, it would appear that law enforcement agencies in certain countries continue to use the term marijuana in certain contexts, thus continuing to cause some confusion.

## where does the term marijuana continue to be used?

There are two groups that continue to use the word marijuana, with both having their origins in the US. They are drug law reform organisations and the medical marijuana lobby.

It would appear that many international cannabis reform organisations, such as the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) and the Marijuana Policy Project, continue to use this term for purely historical reasons. Marijuana was a particularly popular term in the 1970s and many of these groups were set up at that time. Interestingly, although the name of the organisation may still use the terminology, much of the information they provide, both online and in hard copy, refers to the drug as cannabis. Once again, the majority of these groups have their origins in the US and due to the use of the word marihuana/marijuana in their laws, it comes as no surprise that they continue to use the term in an effort to have these laws changed.

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As with drug law reform, it would appear that the medical marijuana lobby continues to use the term primarily because of historical reasons. Many of these lobby groups began to appear around the same time as the drug law reform organisations and as they too are attempting to affect legal change, the use of the term marijuana may be regarded as more appropriate.

### in conclusion

While drug use, like all behaviour, has a context where different cultural groups use their own terms for cannabis products, when communicating for greatest understanding and scientific rigor across cultures, cannabis is the correct term.