

What is harm reduction

Harm reduction is an approach which aims to reduce the risks when using alcohol or other drugs such as cannabis and encourages safer behaviours. Harm reduction recognises that some people will continue to use cannabis regardless of the risks. However, there are strategies that can be used to help lower the risk of harm when using cannabis.

What is Cannabis (Also called marijuana, pot, weed, grass, gunja, yarndi, mary jane)

Cannabis is a depressant drug which means that it slows down the functioning of the brain and the body. Cannabis contains the psychoactive chemical THC (delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol) which can cause hallucinogenic effects. Hallucinogens affect the brain, producing distortions of the senses, mood and thought.

Cannabis - Onset and duration of effects

When smoking or vaporising cannabis, the effects usually start within 10 minutes, peak after 15-40 minutes, and last between 2-6 hours depending on tolerance and dose.

When consumed orally (e.g. eating or drinking), it can take approximately 60-90 minutes to feel the effects. The peak effects occur approximately at 3-5 hours and the effects can last depending on tolerance and dose for 8-12 hours or more.

Remember... The effects from eating cannabis last longer (up to 12 hours), can be more intense and are less controllable compared to smoking or vaporising cannabis. When eaten it can take at least an hour or two to feel the effects, so avoid having more.

Half life: Even though the apparent effects of cannabis wear off after a few hours the half life for cannabis (e.g. the time it takes for half of a substance to leave the body) can be much longer. This builds up over time and regular cannabis users may still have the drug present in their system for days and even weeks after stopping.

Looking after yourself

It is important to know that using cannabis is never completely safe but there are strategies that you can use to reduce the harm. Cannabis use may cause harm to your mental or physical health, relationships, behaviours, finances, or ability to work, study or care for people. Here are some strategies that can be used to help lower the risks.

- **Some people are more at risk.** Think carefully before you start using and people under 18, and women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy, or breastfeeding should not use cannabis. People who are at risk of depression, anxiety, psychotic disorders, schizoaffective disorders, respiratory problems (if smoking), and heart problems should not use cannabis.
- **Start small.** The strength of cannabis varies significantly. Whether you are using cannabis for the first time or using regularly it's always important to start with a small amount first, let it reach its peak, and then carefully consider as to whether you'll have more.
- **Don't spin.** Spinning tobacco with cannabis and then smoking it is the most harmful way to use. Spinning increases the risk of developing respiratory problems including cancer. It also increases your risk of becoming a regular tobacco smoker.
- **Don't mix.** Mixing cannabis with over-the-counter, prescribed medications and other drugs increases the risk of harm. This is particularly the case with cannabis and alcohol and even small amounts of alcohol can increase THC levels. Sticking to one drug reduces the risks as the interactions between cannabis, alcohol and other drugs including prescribed medications can be unpredictable.
- **Set limits.** Setting a limit on when and how much cannabis you use can help keep your use under control and reduces your risk of developing dependence. Having breaks also gives your brain and lungs a rest and the more you break up the pattern of use, the easier it is to manage your use.
- **Don't use alone.** There are risks when using alone. It's always better to be in a safe environment and with people you trust if something does go wrong. It's also important that if anyone becomes unwell to stay with them and don't let them go off alone.

- **Delay.** Try delaying when you first use cannabis in your day. It can be helpful to distract yourself e.g., talk to a friend, eat, go for a walk, or complete certain jobs/activities before you use cannabis.
- **Safer ways of using.** Consider using a vaporiser instead of smoking as burning cannabis releases tar and other cancer causing chemicals. Vaporisers heat cannabis to below its combustion temperature and significantly reduces the amount of tar and toxins released. If you are going to use a vaporiser some are better or safer than others.

Remember... If you do choose to use a bong or water pipe, glass is safer than plastic and keeping them clean is important.

- **Don't hold.** Avoid inhaling deeply and don't hold your breath as it increases the risk of lung damage. It also doesn't increase the effects.
- **Monitor your moods and emotions.** Cannabis use can impact your mental health and can increase the risk of developing mental health problems including paranoia, depression, anxiety, hallucinations or psychosis. If there is a past or family history of mental health concerns you are more at risk.
- **Be prepared and careful.** Cannabis can affect your decision-making and risky things can become more risky. Some common things to plan for can be your transport home to avoid drug driving, having your phone charged with credit, and being prepared for safe sex.
- **Don't drive.** Cannabis affects your ability to drive safely (this also includes riding a bike or scooter). It's an offence to have any amount of THC in your system while you drive or are in charge of a motor vehicle.
- **Adopt a healthy and balanced lifestyle.** If you are using cannabis remember to stay hydrated, eat well and have healthy snacks available, sleep and exercise. It's also important to find a balance between work, study, play and rest. It can also be helpful to have regular check-ups with your GP to monitor your health.
- **Caring for others.** Cannabis use can affect your children and others around you. Ensure your children remain safe and supervised at all times.
Please Note: Sleeping with a child in the same bed while under the influence of substances can be particularly dangerous.

- **Medicinal cannabis.** Smoking cannabis for medicinal purposes is not recommended however some studies suggest that prescribed medicinal cannabis in the form of oral extracts, sprays or pills can reduce pain and help treat some illnesses. People wanting advice on medicinal cannabis should consult a health professional.

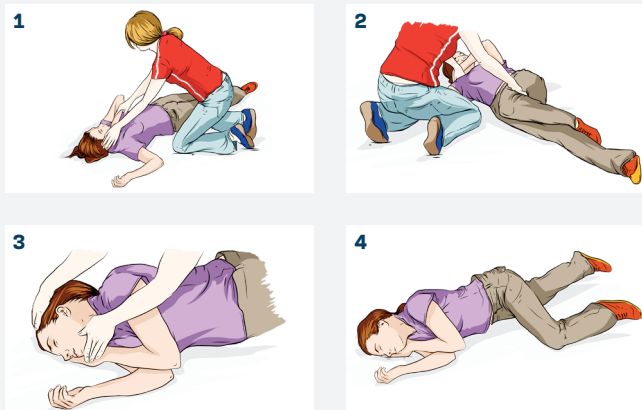
What help is available?

Adis 24/7 Alcohol and Drug Support is a 24 hour, 7 day a week confidential support service for people in Queensland with alcohol and other drug concerns, their families and health professionals.

Talk to us. Anytime, anywhere.
1800 177 833

What should I do in an emergency?

If someone is experiencing strong hallucinations, anxiety or paranoia, try and keep them calm and safe. If the person has collapsed or lost consciousness, call an ambulance on **triple zero (000)**. If they have stopped breathing commence CPR. If they are breathing normally, place them into the recovery position and continue to monitor them until the ambulance arrives.



Disclaimer

This factsheet does not accept, condone or promote the use of cannabis or other drugs. While most people who use cannabis do not suffer serious harms, the use of any drug, whether legal or not, always carries some risk. No amount of planning and care can ensure that you will have a 'risk free' experience when using cannabis and the best way to avoid potential harms is to not use. By developing this factsheet we are not suggesting that cannabis use is safe.