

Facts on Cannabis

Facts on Cannabis



Major new free booklet designed to give individuals and families in Australia the facts about cannabis launched by the Australian National Council on Drugs.

The council says it is time people had the facts about the drug. Statistics show close to 300,000 Australians use cannabis every day and 1.8 million Australians have used cannabis in the past 12 months. The council is urging people to download the free booklet so they can get the facts. Many leading international organisations have backed the initiative.

A major new booklet has just been launched by The Australian National Council on Drugs — it is designed to give individuals and families in Australia the facts about cannabis.

The new free booklet has the backing of numerous major international organisations and The Australian National Council on Drugs says it is time people in Australia had the facts about cannabis and the damage it can do to people.

Latest figures paint an extraordinary picture. Statistics show 5.5 million Australians aged 14 and over have used cannabis at some time. Close to 300,000 Australians — enough to fill a massive capital city the size of Hobart or Canberra — use cannabis every single day. 1.8 million Australians have used cannabis in the past 12 months.

The ANCD believes that there is much ill informed opinion and misinformation about cannabis and this booklet aims to clear this up. Individuals and families wanting the free publication “Cannabis — Your Questions Answered” can download it by just visiting www.ancd.org.au The publication will also be of interest to anyone working in the health field, education, politics or other professional areas. Over 700 studies from around the world were reviewed to create the booklet.

The ANCD worked with The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre to create the booklet which was checked and supported by numerous international bodies including The National Institute of Drug Abuse in the USA and The Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College, London.

Dr. John Herron — the Chairman of The Australian National Council on Drugs — said, “We simply want people to be much more aware of the problems this drug causes. Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in Australia. Most people don’t understand you can become dependent on cannabis. It can take over your life to a point that you just can’t do without it and it can wreck relationships, employment and many aspects of a person’s life. It is not harmless.”

“The current scientific evidence shows a very clear link between regular or heavy use of cannabis and some mental illness such as depression or anxiety. For young people there can be negative and long-term impacts. It certainly appears the younger the person is using cannabis, the greater the risk there may be for developmental problems. Whilst the current scientific evidence does not show that cannabis causes severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, cannabis can directly trigger problems in anyone who has a pre-

disposition to mental illness.”

“This is an issue for all Australians because so many young people try this drug and we have a real problem with it in the community. People may think dabbling is no big deal. That’s nonsense. There is no safe minimum with this drug. People can and do cross a line where they become dependent on this drug and they need it every day, no matter what. My message to families is if you suspect somebody has an issue, talk to them. Communication is the key.”

As part of the new information campaign, The Australian National Council on Drugs is highlighting that contrary to popular belief, the biggest cannabis users are not — in fact — young people.

Statistics show in a period of 7 days, 272,600 Australians aged 20–29 use cannabis and 240,000 30–39 year olds also use cannabis. Over a period of 7 days, 79,700 14–19 year olds use cannabis.

Gino Vumbaca — who is the Executive Officer for The Australian National Council on Drugs — said, “The facts are unquestionably needed. That’s exactly why this booklet was produced. Individuals and families will find it very useful. So will politicians, people in the health field, GPs and many others. Undoubtedly people sometimes make wild claims about this drug that just cannot be substantiated. It’s time to change that.”

“For instance, the fact is cannabis use in Australia is actually decreasing. That is a positive — and it’s been happening for a number of years. The problem is though, that people who continue to use cannabis now use more than they used to. We’re not sure why this trend is happening. We’re extremely concerned that the best part of 300,000 people use cannabis every day. You could fill the Olympic Stadium at Homebush three times with those people. People do not understand the potential harms and consequences.”

“Cannabis is used for many reasons. People often get a sense they can escape from problems by using it. It can never be an answer. Treatment experts will tell you that people that develop problems with cannabis often become highly disconnected and disinterested in most things. They lose interest in relationships and working. Their entire focus starts to move to cannabis.”

“We’d like to see more diversion of people with problems into education and treatment programs. Making criminals of people for using this drug is just not an answer. We don’t believe sending people to prison for using cannabis achieves anything positive. We need to divert people with cannabis problems into the health system. We need more education and treatment services.”

“Very few people set out to become dependent. It creeps up on people. If you are hooked, people will literally get withdrawal symptoms. They can feel psychologically affected and unwell as well as have cravings, depression and anxiety.”

“There can be enormous pressure on kids to experiment with drugs. Especially cannabis. You cannot cocoon kids. You can arm them with the information and knowledge they need. That’s why this booklet will help. If you are facing cannabis use in the home, don’t overreact. Talk and listen.”

Professor Margaret Hamilton — who is a Professor of Public Health and a senior member of the ANCD — said, “Unquestionably Australia has a significant problem with cannabis. What isn’t being recognised is that some of the people that use it get into trouble. The majority of cannabis users don’t get into serious trouble. As with alcohol though, some people end up in a huge mess.”

“People who become dependent do change. They may drop out of usual activities like education, social relationships or employment and spend too much of their time and money on cannabis. Ten years may disappear just like that. We need more accurate information out there. For those who become dependent we have to find better ways of helping people who ultimately have a health problem. There needs to be more investigation into how to best treat users who may have multiple issues. We must not over dramatise this problem. Alcohol is also a massive issue and should not be forgotten in this debate.”

Gary — who is in rehab for the third time trying to become cannabis free — said, “Cannabis is insidious. I had no idea you could get hooked on it. I tried it as a young man because it seemed like something I should do. It took a while but eventually I became dependent on it. I had a major job in a marketing industry. I lost interest in the job and the people because everyday — after work — I just wanted to get home and get to the cannabis. My simple message to people is this. You can get hooked. You can become dependent — long before you really think you are dependent. It’s just not worth the risk.”

“When I was on it, I was moody and behaved differently. I didn’t really respect people. Part of the problem is that pot has this harmless reputation — and that’s so wrong. You can get addicted. It’s a very dangerous harmful drug.”

The ANCD has five key recommendations. It says there should be more appropriate fact based information and education available for young people including schools. It says there needs to be more support for a national strategic approach to cannabis use as well as greater support to divert cannabis users into education and treatment.

The new free educational booklet “Cannabis — Answers to your Questions” can be downloaded by just visiting www.ancd.org.au.

Some key statistics at a glance

- 5.5 million Australians aged 14 and over have used cannabis at some time.
- 1.8 million Australians — enough to fill a massive capital city the size of Brisbane — use cannabis over a 12 month period.
- 295,200 Australians use cannabis every day ... enough people to fill the Olympic Stadium at Homebush three times.
- Up to 10 per cent of people in drug treatment now declare cannabis as their primary drug of concern.
- Contrary to popular belief, young people are not the biggest users of cannabis. Over a 7 day period, 272,600 Australians aged 20–29 use cannabis and 240,000 30–39 year olds also use cannabis. Over a period of 7 days 79,700 people aged 14–19 use cannabis.
- “Cannabis — Your Questions Answered” has the backing of the Department of Pharmacology at the Commonwealth University of Virginia, The National Institute of Drug Abuse in the USA, The Department of Psychology at Virginia Tech, The Center for Addiction Research at the University of Arkansas, The Department of Pharmacology at the University of Oxford and The Institute of Psychiatry at Kings College London.

Key messages about Cannabis:

- Cannabis is not a harmless drug
- Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in Australia

- People do get dependent on cannabis
- There is a significant difference in the levels of harm experienced by heavy users of cannabis, that is, there is a significant difference in the level of physical and mental problems that can be experienced by regular heavy users of cannabis when compared to experimental or occasional users of cannabis
- There can be negative and long term developmental impacts on young people who use cannabis regularly or heavily — the younger the person the greater the risk there appears to be for developmental problems
- The current scientific evidence does show a link between regular and heavy cannabis use and some mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety
- Cannabis is a psychoactive substance that can trigger problems in those with a pre-disposition to a mental illness, however we know the majority of people and particularly young people, have little knowledge of their genetic risk or pre-disposition to mental illness
- The current scientific evidence does not show that cannabis causes severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia
- Cannabis dependence or addiction is when obtaining and using cannabis takes over your life. This pre-occupation with 'scoring' and 'getting stoned' can lead to neglect in other areas of your life and create problems within the family, at work and can become a financial burden
- Cannabis dependence or addiction does take time to develop
- Up to 10% of people in drug treatment now declare cannabis as their primary drug of concern
- If facing cannabis use in the home or with a family member or friend for the first time — don't overreact, instead try and talk and listen to your kids
- Cannabis use is an illegal activity for which there are consequences, including some long term legal consequences such as difficulty in obtaining travelling visas to some countries and restrictions in employment opportunities if there is a criminal drug conviction on your record
- Driving under the influence of cannabis or any other drug, including alcohol, is very dangerous for both the driver and other people using the roads
- The available evidence does not suggest that the potency of cannabis has increased significantly over the past 10–15 years. What has changed significantly is the parts of the plant consumed and the manner by which it is consumed. That is, people used to smoke the far less potent leaf of the cannabis plant and generally in 'joints' whereas today it is far more likely to be the most potent part of the plant — the 'heads' — which are smoked with a 'bong' or water-pipe, and which exposes the smoker to far greater levels of smoke and THC
- There is inconsistent evidence to suggest that hydroponically grown plants are more potent — as a result of hybrid agricultural techniques there are more potent strains of cannabis available, but hydroponics remains a method of cultivation that allows the growers to more easily avoid detection (indoor growing) and achieve a greater level of efficiency and control over the crop cycle (grow cannabis at all times of the year in controlled conditions)
- The use of cannabis or any other drugs in front of children can acculturate use for these children, just as the misuse of licit drugs such as alcohol can also acculturate problematic alcohol use in children

Key recommendations:

- Ensure there is appropriate evidence based information and education available at schools.
- Support a national strategic approach to addressing cannabis use
- Support the diversion of cannabis users into education or treatment under a cautioning, or similar scheme
- Support an appropriate investigation to allow medical use of cannabis for those that obtain relief from pain and suffering when using cannabis
- Continue to focus law enforcement attention on targeting the suppliers of cannabis

5 May 2006

The ANCD is the principal advisory body to Government on drug and alcohol issues.

For media enquiries, please contact:

Ross Woodward

(03) 9769 6488