


*fast facts on*  
**mental health**  
+  
**Cannabis**



Cannabis is an illegal drug 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 tetra hydro-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 people. Some experience very unpleasant psychological effects when they use cannabis, like severe anxiety or panic reactions. At high doses users may experience confusion, hear voices that are not really there (i.e. hallucinations), or believe things that are not true (i.e. 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 cannabis wear off, but can be very frightening, and may be enough to put some people off using the drug 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?

Although it is rare, some people may experience a short-term psychotic episode (a split from reality) after a heavy session of cannabis use. This can last from several hours up to 2-3 days, with disturbances in thinking, emotions and behaviour.

There is consistent evidence which shows that cannabis use may exacerbate psychotic symptoms in people who have a mental disorder, even if they no longer have acute symptoms. The drug may also trigger a first psychotic experience or 'episode' in people with a personal or family history of schizophrenia. In fact, reports show 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 schizophrenia?**

Schizophrenia is a psychotic illness, and those with schizophrenia have difficulty distinguishing what is real from what is not. Someone suffering from psychosis may experience hallucinations or delusions. These symptoms may also be accompanied by muddled thinking and speech, making it difficult for other people to understand what the person is saying.

Some claim that cannabis can cause schizophrenia. Evidence suggests that cannabis may somehow trigger schizophrenia in those who are already at risk of developing the disorder. Those with a vulnerability to develop schizophrenia, such as having a family history of the illness, are advised not to use cannabis for this reason.

## **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 has been concern that cannabis use may cause, or exacerbate, longer-lasting forms of anxiety disorders such as panic disorder.

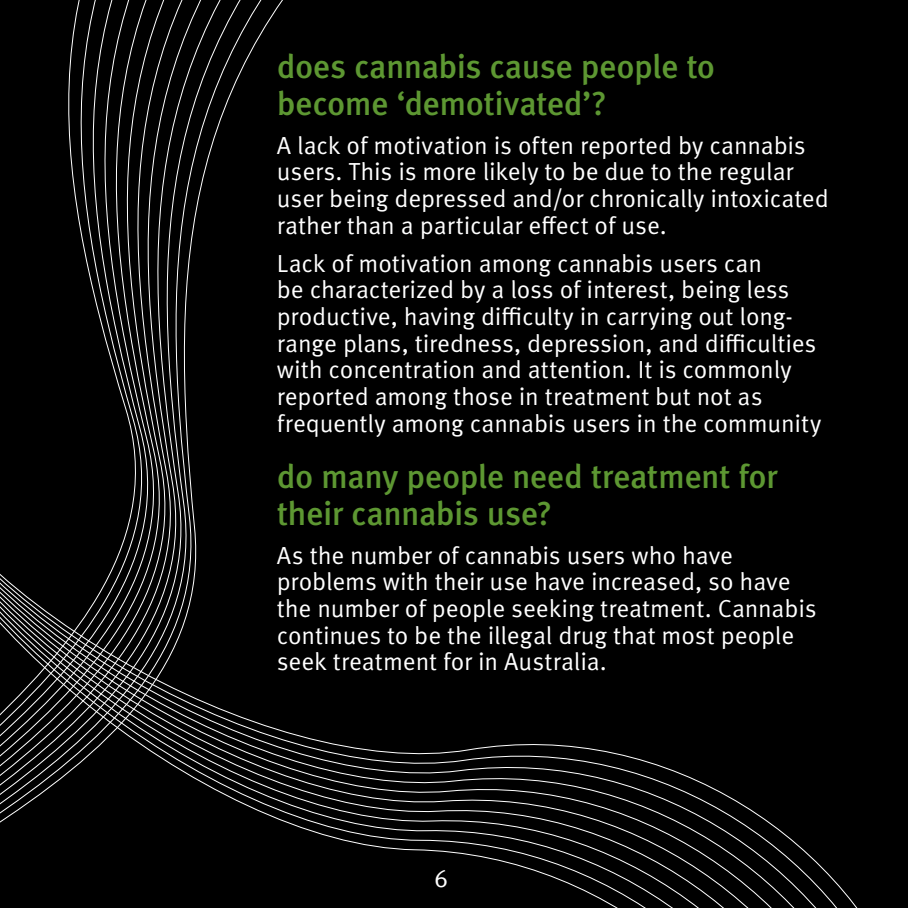
## is there a link between cannabis use by young people and suicide?

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 violence 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.



## 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. It is commonly reported among those in treatment but not as frequently among cannabis users in the community

## do many people need treatment for their cannabis use?

As the number of cannabis users who have problems with their use have increased, so have the number of people seeking treatment. Cannabis continues to be the illegal drug that most people seek treatment for in Australia.

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

## **what treatment is available?**

Compared to other drugs, there are fewer specific treatments available for cannabis-related problems. Most involve counselling, although various drug treatment options are being investigated.

## **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 being widely used in the population and people are starting to use it at younger ages, it is extremely important for people, especially 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 more safely 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 and 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](http://www.ncpic.org.au)**