

cannabis withdrawal

is there such a thing as cannabis withdrawal?

For much of the 1960s and 1970s, researchers did not consider cannabis to be a drug of dependence due to the lack of a withdrawal syndrome similar to that seen with opioids or alcohol. Many carefully controlled animal and human research trials, however, now clearly demonstrate that a withdrawal syndrome occurs when regular cannabis smokers stop smoking.

Cannabis withdrawal is similar to the withdrawal experienced from stopping tobacco smoking. As with tobacco, the withdrawal symptoms associated with cannabis can be disruptive enough to contribute to continued use and also contribute to relapse in people trying to quit. Cannabis withdrawal is not the same for everybody. Various factors influence the severity of cannabis withdrawal. Factors that may influence how severe cannabis withdrawal will be and how long it may last when someone tries to quit are:

- how much cannabis the person uses (people who use cannabis frequently will have a more severe withdrawal)
- how dependent someone is (people who are more dependent upon cannabis are likely to have a more severe withdrawal)
- how sensitive a person is to distress (people who are less tolerant of emotional distress may experience a more pronounced cannabis withdrawal syndrome)

Most studies suggest that withdrawal symptoms start on the first day of abstinence, and usually peak within the first two to three days of quitting, with the exception of sleep disturbance. In general, withdrawal symptoms are usually over after two weeks, but this depends on how dependent someone is on cannabis before trying to quit.

what are the symptoms of cannabis withdrawal?

When people stop using cannabis after prolonged use (either because they cannot get any or because they are trying to quit) they may experience a variety of withdrawal symptoms including:

- sleep difficulties including insomnia and strange dreams
- mood swings/irritability
- depression
- anxiety/nervousness
- restlessness/physical tension
- reduced appetite
- nausea
- cravings to smoke cannabis

Whilst individual symptoms can be relatively mild, in combination they can still contribute to why a person keeps using cannabis and why they may relapse if trying to quit.

is there any treatment for cannabis withdrawal?

Some people may find that they need a counsellor to help them manage their cannabis withdrawal symptoms and prevent relapse. Other people may be able to manage the symptoms on their own. Getting a good night's sleep may be one of the most important factors for ensuring success. This may be difficult since sleep disturbance is one of the most common withdrawal symptoms, although it does not make it impossible. Practising good 'sleep hygiene' can help someone to manage the sleep difficulties associated with withdrawal. This involves such things as not drinking caffeine after noon, exercising daily especially in the morning, having a comfortable bed, avoiding alcohol or other drugs to help you sleep, and avoiding stimulating activities before bed (like playing video games). Developing a good plan for combating sleep disturbance can make it easier to cope with the other withdrawal symptoms.

Simply recognising and being aware of the mild but important effects of cannabis withdrawal symptoms can help someone to successfully reduce their use or quit. Studies have shown that the chances of successfully quitting cannabis are greatly increased once the intense phases of withdrawal have passed– so it is important to developing a coping plan before trying to quit.

If someone continues to feel discomfort after two weeks of abstinence from cannabis, it may be related to the underlying reasons for using cannabis in the first place (such as anxiety, depression or social issues). In these cases, people trying to quit may want to seek the help of a GP or counsellor to discuss strategies to deal with these underlying issues. Rebates may be available through Medicare or private health insurers for services provided. As yet, there are no effective pharmacological treatments to help reduce cannabis withdrawal symptoms or to block the effects of cannabis, although studies are underway. There are a handful of studies that demonstrate that brief cognitive-behavioural treatments can be helpful for people trying to abstain or reduce their cannabis use.

For more information please see the factsheets '[cannabis and dependence](#)' and '[treatment for cannabis use problems](#)'.