

Cannabis and your mental health



**This leaflet is
about how cannabis
can affect your
mental health.**



Make an informed decision

People use cannabis for all kinds of reasons – for a laugh with mates for example, or to help calm down in stressful situations.

But as well as the effects people use it for, it can also have side effects. It can make you feel sick or panicky – and some people even suffer psychosis.

These sorts of side effects can happen to anyone. But if you have mental health problems, the side effects of cannabis can be worse than they are for most other people.

And if you're trying to lead the life you want and deal with your mental health problems, using cannabis can actually stand in your way.

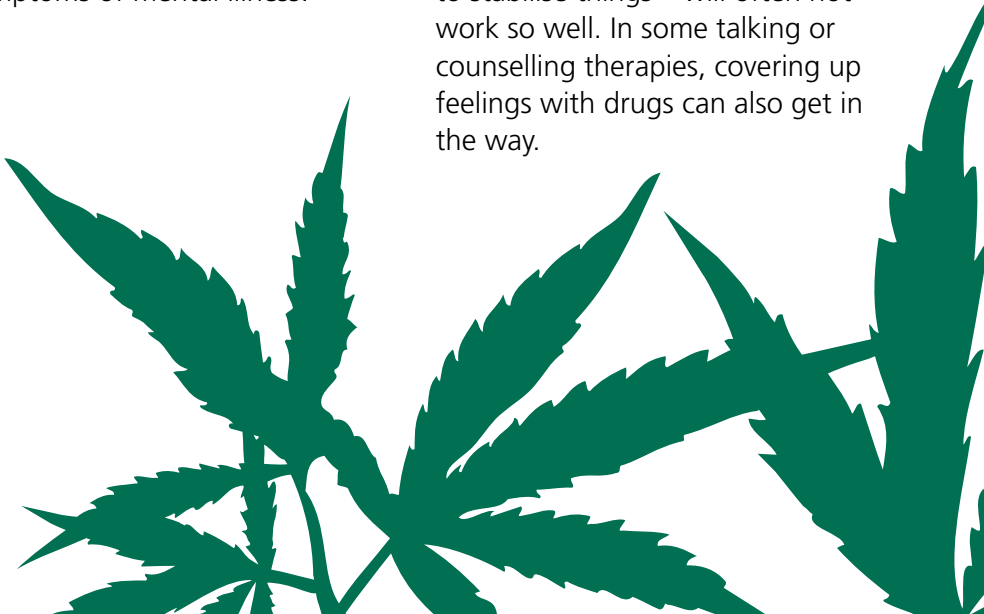
It's important to know how cannabis can affect you, so you can make an informed decision about using it.

How cannabis affects you

When you use cannabis, the active chemical in the drug attaches itself to nerves in your brain. This causes an intense release of chemicals from the nerves, and it's the effects of these chemicals that make you feel relaxed or happy, anxious or paranoid.

If you have mental health problems, the nerves and chemicals in your brain are often not working fully in balance and this can contribute to the symptoms of mental illness.

So adding cannabis chemicals to your brain when you have mental health problems will probably make those problems worse. And your treatment – which is trying to stabilise things – will often not work so well. In some talking or counselling therapies, covering up feelings with drugs can also get in the way.



There is very clear medical evidence that for some people cannabis can:

- > make a wide range of symptoms worse, including anxiety, sleeping badly, mood problems such as depression, paranoia and hallucinations;
- > worsen voices, if you hear them;
- > make you feel more tired and uninterested in things;
- > make it more likely that your illness could relapse earlier and more frequently, partly because of having more severe symptoms;
- > make your mental health medication work less well;

- > make you more likely to stop using your medication, partly because it will seem like it's not working; and
- > because of some or all of these, make you less likely to recover fully.

If you use stronger types of cannabis like skunk or 'home-grown' types, all these side effects could affect you more seriously.

You can find out more about how cannabis affects the brain – and the links between cannabis and mental health problems – at <http://kc.nimhe.org.uk>

There is also evidence that there is an association between using cannabis and later developing psychotic symptoms including problems such as schizophrenia.

Can cannabis help you cope?

Some people with mental health problems find that cannabis seems to make them feel slightly better for a while. For example it might calm them, make them feel less stressed or make the voices some people experience seem less troublesome for a time.

But cannabis cannot provide proper, long-term relief from your symptoms. After any short-term benefits wear off, your mental health can then get worse.

Cannabis can also stop you managing your symptoms as well as you might. And it can reduce the effectiveness of your medication.

In fact, rather than helping with your mental health problems, by using cannabis you'll probably make yourself feel bad for longer.

My story

Nick is a 20-year-old man who has recovered from a three-year mental illness.

'When my care co-ordinator first told me cannabis was bad for my mental health, I didn't believe him – all my friends smoked it and they never had any problems.

'I didn't think my doctors really understood me: I was taking the medication and doing what they told me to, but I still didn't feel right – I still got all the symptoms of my mental illness.

'When my care co-ordinator made a chart of my progress over 18 months, you could see that every time I had to be admitted to hospital was after I'd been smoking a lot of weed.

'So I started cutting down and in the end I completely stopped using cannabis. It was hard, and I even had to stop seeing some of the mates I used to smoke with, which was really tough.

'But stopping really helped me recover: now I've got a full-time job and I feel a lot better. I honestly don't reckon I'd feel like I do now if I hadn't stopped smoking cannabis.'



Cannabis and your general health

Cannabis isn't just bad for you if you've got mental health problems.

Some people become dependent on cannabis so that it can be hard for them to stop using it without a lot of will-power or some additional help or support.

Cannabis smoke can be harmful in itself, and with long-term use you're more likely to get illnesses like bronchitis and cancer. If you are smoking cannabis mixed with tobacco you'll also have to deal with all of the problems associated with cigarette smoking.

Using a lot of cannabis can make you too tired to see friends or can cause you trouble at college, at work or in your relationships. And it can be an expensive habit to keep up.

Finally, don't forget that cannabis is illegal.



So what can you do?

If you think that using cannabis might be affecting your mental health, the first thing you can do is speak to someone about it.

Don't be afraid to talk to your doctor, nurse, drug worker, social worker or care co-ordinator – or your friends and family.

Decide whether you want to try to cut down or stop using cannabis. Try giving it a go – you might find it's not too difficult for you. **Stick with it and keep trying.** A healthcare worker might be able to give you advice and leaflets to help.

Even if you find it hard to stop completely, there are things you can do that will be likely to help you. For example:

- > limit the amount you inhale and be particularly careful with 'skunk' or stronger types of cannabis;
- > try not to turn to cannabis or use more of it when you're feeling stressed and anxious; and
- > stick with your prescribed medication.

If you decide you want to keep using cannabis, talk to the mental health professional supporting your care so you can find out fully what effects it will have on your medication and your mental health problems.

Find out more

To find out more about cannabis and how it affects your mental health, you will need to talk to a doctor, nurse, social worker or care co-ordinator.

If there's not a health professional you normally talk to, you can call NHS Direct on **0845 46 47***.

You can also visit NHS Direct Online at **www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk** or NHS Direct Interactive on digital satellite TV (just press the interactive button on your remote control).

For friendly confidential information and advice about all drugs, including cannabis, call FRANK on **0800 77 66 00** or visit **talktofrank.com**. FRANK is free from a landline and some mobiles, and won't show up on your bill. You can use the internet free at most local libraries.

You can also get help at **www.knowcannabis.org.uk**, where you can find out more about the effects of cannabis and how to go about cutting down and stopping using it.

You can also get the guide to cutting down and stopping using cannabis by calling **0800 555 777** and asking for the 'KC Guide'. We won't tell anyone about your call and we'll send you the leaflet in a plain envelope.

If you are discussing your plans with a mental health professional supporting your care, you may find they already have copies of this and other leaflets.

You can find out more about the research into the links between cannabis and mental health problems at **<http://kc.nimhe.org.uk>**

*Calls to NHS Direct cost a maximum of 4 pence per minute from a BT landline. Costs from mobiles and other networks may vary. Your service provider may charge a minimum cost per call. For patients' safety, calls to NHS Direct are recorded.

'The doctors told me to try smoking less – just to see if it helped. It's a lot easier to say that than do it. But I've tried and, if I'm honest, it's made a difference.'

'I still smoke, and when things get bad I still end up smoking a lot. But at least now I know that the less cannabis I use, the better I feel in the long run.'

Vikki, 23



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266823

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