

Cannabis: What Parents/Guardians and Caregivers Need to Know

This Info-Sheet on recreational cannabis is for parents/guardians and caregivers of youth in grades 6 to 12. It provides information about cannabis, cannabis legalization, risks, signs of a problem, how to help your child, and where to get more information and support.

The legalization of recreational cannabis for adults who are 19 or older gives parents/guardians and caregivers an opportunity for discussion and reflection around substance use. It also encourages youth to think about how the choices they make, now and in future, will help them achieve their short-and long-term goals. While it is illegal for youth under the age of 19 to use, buy, possess, cultivate or share recreational cannabis, legalization may result in youth coming forward with questions on this issue.



Bottom Line

- Cannabis is still illegal for anyone under the age of 19 in Ontario.
- Although most youth in Ontario do not use cannabis, even occasional use has risks.
- For youth who use cannabis often and over time, it can be addictive, can affect brain development and may increase the risk for mental health problems.
- Youth are especially vulnerable to the effects of cannabis since brain development is not complete up to age 25.
- Parents/guardians and caregivers play an important role in their child's life – stay connected by talking to your child, knowing their friends and being prepared to answer questions.

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis (also called marijuana, weed, dope and pot) is a drug that comes from the cannabis plant. It consists of dried flowers and leaves that are greenish or brownish in colour. It can also be used for medical purposes, which requires a prescription under federal law. Different ways to use cannabis include, but are not limited to:¹

- Smoked as a cigarette, called a joint, spliff or a blunt.
- Smoked or vaporized (sometimes called vaping) through a pipe, bong or an e-cigarette.
- Mixed into a drink or food, such as tea, brownies, gummies and candies, called edibles.
- Consumed as a tincture (alcohol- based extract) on its own or added to food or drinks.
- Heated and inhaled (called dabbing) as oil, wax, or in a form called shatter that is made from cannabis resin or hashish.

Because cannabis is a psychoactive substance there are risks associated with using, regardless of how it is consumed. Some ways of using cannabis are more harmful than others (e.g., smoking can lead to lung damage).² While vaping or edibles reduce some of the health risks, it is important to convey to youth that they are not completely risk-free (e.g., edibles can lead to consumption of high doses, which can lead to acute impairment or adverse events).²

In 2017, one in five (19%) grade 7-12 students in Ontario said they used cannabis at least once in the previous year.³ In this group, most students reported that they used a bong, joint, or edibles. Use increases with grade and was highest in grade 12 (37%). Only 2% of students in grade 7 and 8 reported using cannabis. It's important to remember that 81% of students in grades 7 to 12 reported that they have not used cannabis at all in the past year.³

How does cannabis make you feel?

Cannabis contains THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), a chemical that causes the mental and physical effects (also known as a “high”).¹ Cannabis can make some people feel relaxed and happy, but it can also cause confusion, drowsiness, forgetfulness, panic, delusions and distorted perceptions.⁴ Studies show that the average potency of THC in cannabis today is almost 10% higher than 30 years ago.⁵

When cannabis is smoked or vaporized, the effects begin right away and can last up to six hours or longer. The effects of edibles may begin between 30 minutes and two hours after ingestion, and can last 12 hours or longer.⁴ Although edibles do not harm the lungs and respiratory system like smoking cannabis, it can take longer for their effects to be noticed. This delayed effect can cause a person to consume larger amounts than they intended in a short amount of time.² Consuming large amounts of cannabis is not life threatening, unlike other substances, such as alcohol, opioids, and/or other drugs that can lead to fatal overdoses.⁶ However, consumption of large amounts of cannabis can have negative consequences, such as increased risk of paranoia, delusion, or psychotic episodes.^{2, 4}

What does cannabis legalization mean for youth?

In Ontario, it is illegal for youth under the age of 19 to use, buy, possess, cultivate, or share recreational cannabis. Smoking and vaping cannabis is prohibited in places where smoking tobacco or using e-cigarettes is prohibited. It cannot be smoked or vaped at school, on school grounds, on children’s playgrounds and all public areas within 20 meters of these grounds, or consumed in any way in motor vehicles, motorized snow vehicles and boats, subject to certain exemptions.⁷ There are penalties for youth and adults who give or sell cannabis to minors including fines and jail time.⁷ Driving impaired by cannabis is illegal and strict rules are in place for drug-impaired driving among youth.⁷

Even though recreational cannabis is legal for adults 19 years of age or older, most Ontario students (62%) in grades 7-12 say that they do not have plans to try cannabis.³



Did You Know?



There is a range, or spectrum, in how people use substances:^{8, 9}

Substance use – people use different kinds of drugs, like caffeine, alcohol, and cannabis, for many reasons; some use it to relax or feel good. Depending on the substance and how often someone uses it, it may or may not lead to problems.^{8, 9}

Problematic use – is substance use that causes negative health and social consequences.^{8, 9} For instance, youth who often use cannabis may experience problems with attendance and may have difficulties in their studies at school. They may experience problems with memory, concentration, and thinking and may have difficulties with relationships.

Addiction – is when substance use becomes uncontrollable. When someone has an addiction, they often have a strong desire to use a substance, even when it is causing them difficulties in their life or they want to quit.⁹ A young person may be showing an addictive relationship with cannabis if they feel unable to control or reduce their use.

What are the risks for youth of using cannabis?

It is a myth that recreational cannabis was legalized because it is harmless.¹⁰ The federal government legalized recreational cannabis to create strict rules for producing, distributing, selling, and possessing cannabis across Canada. The legalization aims to keep cannabis out of the hands of youth and protect public health and safety by allowing adults to access cannabis legally.¹¹

Trying cannabis is unlikely to cause serious problems in most people, but even occasional use can be harmful. Youth who use cannabis at a young age, often, and long-term (for months or years), are at risk of long-term health and social problems.^{1, 4, 5}

For example:

- **Harm to the brain**, such as problems with memory, concentration, thinking, learning, handling emotions, and decision-making.^{4, 5} Research shows that cannabis use can affect normal brain functioning in youth and young adults up to age 25, and may alter brain development.⁵
- **Problems with academic progress**, such as impact on learning and attention, difficulty with completing school work, lower school performance, and increased risk of dropping out of high school.⁵
- **Mental health problems**, such as psychosis or schizophrenia and, possibly, depression, anxiety and suicide, especially if there's a personal or family history of mental illness.^{1, 4, 5}
- **Difficulties with relationships**, such as conflict at home, school or work.⁴
- **Physical health harms**, such as lung and respiratory problems from smoking cannabis.⁴
- **Addiction**, such as difficulty controlling how much or how often the person uses it, even when it's causing them challenges in their life.⁹ Cannabis can be especially addictive for youth.⁵

What are the signs my child may have a problem with cannabis or other substances?

Like other substances, most youth will not use cannabis, some will use it recreationally without long term problems, and a subset may develop problems due to sustained use over time.³ It is sometimes hard to detect a problem with cannabis use. Talk to your child and find out if there is a problem. Some signs of a cannabis problem can look like typical youth behaviour.¹² For example:^{1, 12, 13}

- Ignoring responsibilities at work, school, or home.
- Giving up activities that they used to find important or enjoyable.
- Using more cannabis, more frequently.
- Feeling unable to cut down or control cannabis use.
- Changes in mood (e.g., feeling irritable and paranoid).
- Changing friends.
- Having difficulties with family members, friends, and peers.
- Being secretive or dishonest.
- Changing sleep habits, appetite, or other behaviors.
- Borrowing money or having more money than usual.

How can I help my child make informed decisions about cannabis?



Stay connected: Adolescence is a time when your child may want to pull away. Respect their independence, but stay connected at the same time. Build a strong relationship with your child by participating in activities with them and getting to know their friends. Having a healthy relationship will increase the likelihood that you can help them to make informed and safer choices.¹⁴



Talk about it: Have open, ongoing talks so your child understands the effects of cannabis and the legal risks of having, using, selling, or sharing it. Pick a time when you're both calm. Let the discussion happen casually or ask your child to let you know when they're ready to talk.¹ Throughout the conversation, be curious to understand what they think. Once youth trust that you are willing to listen to them, they'll be more receptive to hear any concerns you may have regarding cannabis (e.g., about the legal and health risks).



Be positive: When talking about cannabis, avoid trying to frighten, shame or lecture your child.¹² Build trust with active listening skills, such as repeating back what they say, using the language they use, asking for clarification, and thanking them for sharing.¹ It is important to maintain a connection with your child, so that they remain open to future conversations.



Focus on safety and well-being: Let your child know that you care about their well-being. Let your child know about safer choices when it comes to cannabis and work with them to establish limits and understand consequences.^{1, 12} It is critical to emphasize that to stay safe, they should never drive or get into a car with a driver who is under the influence of cannabis.¹¹ Impairment from cannabis can last at least six hours,¹⁵ but could be longer, more than 24 hours, depending on the person and the product used.¹⁶ Using cannabis and alcohol together further increases impairment.¹⁶ Be there to help even if cannabis is involved, such as if they need a ride because they don't want to get in a car with someone who has used cannabis.



Be informed: Keep yourself informed about cannabis. Your child may be learning about substances in school and through other areas of their lives. Being informed allows you to have meaningful two-way conversations with them about cannabis. Be prepared with facts so you can respond to questions they may have.¹⁴ For more information, you can speak with your doctor or review the references and links provided at the end of this info-sheet.



Be supportive: Youth use cannabis for many reasons: to fit in, to feel good, or to cope with stress.¹² Be ready to help your child find healthier coping strategies or professional help if needed.¹² See the section *Getting more information and help* to find resources to support you and your child.



Be an example: If you use substances (e.g., alcohol) as a stress reliever, you might be giving the message that substance use is an appropriate way to handle life's challenges.^{1, 12} Try using other coping strategies, like going for a walk after a stressful day.¹ If your child asks about your substance use, you can be honest but use the opportunity to discuss why people use substances, the dangers of substance use, and how your child can avoid making mistakes you may have made.

References

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Getting more information and help

The resources below offer more information and help for parents/guardians and youth:

- For more ideas on how to talk to your child about cannabis, check out Drug Free Kids Canada's Cannabis Talk Kit with scripts and talking points at <https://www.drugfreekidscanada.org/order-cannabis-talk-kit/>
- For the latest information on cannabis legalization, visit the Government of Ontario's website at www.ontario.ca/cannabis
- To learn about safer use of cannabis, see Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines at <https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/pdfs---reports-and-books---research/canadas-lower-risk-guidelines-cannabis-pdf.pdf>
- A youth version of Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines can be accessed at <http://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/lrcug-for-youth>
- For information on how to use alcohol safely, read Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines at <http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/2012-Canada-Low-Risk-Alcohol-Drinking-Guidelines-Brochure-en.pdf>
- For information about treatment options in your community, talk to your doctor or contact: ConnexOntario at 1-866-531-2600 or www.connexontario.ca
- Youth looking for more information or help can talk or chat online anonymously, 24/7, with a counsellor at Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca

