

Cannabis: It's a No Brainer



**All you need to know about
cannabis and the teenage brain**



www.alcoholforum.org

Produced for AFI by our MaCYSS team

Why a cannabis leaflet from an alcohol charity?

Alcohol Forum Ireland is a national charity that provides support, information and services to individuals, families and communities impacted by alcohol and other drug harm, while also working at the wider levels to change Ireland's problematic relationship with alcohol. Alcohol Forum Ireland has offices in Cavan, Donegal and Sligo and provides a range of front-line services to individuals, families and communities in the southern border counties of Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Monaghan and Cavan. While our work on advocacy, policy and community action focuses specifically on preventing and reducing alcohol harm, our supports and services work with individuals and families negatively impacted by both alcohol and other drug use. Within our work with young people aged 18 years and under, we have become increasingly concerned about the lack of factual information available to parents and young people on the risks of cannabis.

References

To view a full list of references and sources used in the production of this booklet, visit <https://alcoholforum.org/cannabis-booklet-references/>

What's happening in the Adolescent Brain?

During the teenage years our brain is continuing to grow and develop. From age 12 onwards, the brain starts to undergo some pretty important changes.

It is beginning to build new mechanics and is "reprogramming" itself so that adult skills can be developed. The changes allow gradual development so that more responsibility and independence can be gained. The changes support improved skills to solve problems, make sense of complex information and to plan for the future.





Did you know?

- » **The brain is not fully developed until the age of 25.**
- » **Even low level or occasional cannabis use can cause changes in the adolescent brain.**
- » **Scientists have discovered that the teenage brain is more likely to become addicted to substances than the adult brain ... This is why it is so important to avoid all substances during adolescence.**
- » **In Ireland, cannabis is the main substance that under 18's seek treatment for.**

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis is a drug and it is addictive. It comes from the plant *Cannabis sativa*. The cannabis plant contains about 540 chemical substances including one called THC (tetra-hydro-canna-binol).

THC is psychoactive: this means that it can change how the brain works and change mood, awareness, thoughts, feelings, or behaviour.



While some forms of cannabis might appear to be harmless – all types of cannabis can be harmful to young people.

There are many different forms:

- » **E-Liquid (Vape)**
- » **Cannabis Edibles**
- » **Synthetic Cannabinoids**
- » **Herbal Cannabis (Weed)**





E-Liquid (Vape)

- » **There are significant concerns about the use of Vapes/E-Cigarettes as a 'gateway' to other risky behaviours.**
- » **Research on vape ingredients uncovered thousands of unidentified potentially harmful chemical ingredients; a pesticide and two flavourings linked with possible toxic effects and respiratory irritation.**
- » **THC based vaping products are widely available and popular. The levels of THC in cannabis products, including vapes, now often exceeds 95%.**
- » **Vaping of high potency cannabis exposes young people to several long-term health risks, including acute lung injury.**
- » **Hyperemesis syndrome (nausea, dehydration and abdominal pain)**
- » **Vaping has become increasingly attractive due to youth friendly designs, sweet tastes, odourless and its cheap. Products are directly marketed at young people.**



Cannabis Edibles

- » Unlike smoking, a person will not feel the effects immediately from edibles. In some cases, it could take up to two hours before the peak effects are felt. This could lead to overconsumption and adverse effects.
- » Effects of ingesting edibles can last longer, compared to smoking. People may easily consume too much THC without knowing until the effects are felt some time later.
- » Taking too many edibles can cause paranoia, anxiety, vomiting, nausea, delusions or hallucinations which can be frightening, impact mental health or lead to accidental injury.



Synthetic Cannabinoids

Man made chemicals that mimic other forms of cannabis. Synthetic cannabinoids are most often smoked but they can also be used as a liquid in a vape, in a brew or tea.

Research Some of the more specific risks associated with Synthetic cannabinoids are:

- » **You can never be fully sure of the contents or strength of products; the effects and duration of effects can be unpredictable and change depending on the product and type of synthetic cannabinoid**
- » **There are hundreds of different synthetic cannabinoid structures; some are stronger and more toxic than others**



Herbal Cannabis (Weed)

- » **Herbal cannabis is a very common form of cannabis sold and used in Ireland. It is made from the dried leaves and flowers of the cannabis plant.**
- » **Cannabis plants are widely grown indoors now using artificial light and nutrient solutions that produce higher levels of the chemical THC**
- » **Most cannabis sold today has much higher amounts of THC - in 2000, the average level of THC was 6% - this has risen to 16% over the years.**
- » **Stronger variations of cannabis that contain high levels of THC carry with them an increased risk to mental health, particularly with regular use.**

Your Brain on Cannabis

Because the brain is still developing during adolescence, cannabis can have a number of short term and long term effects.

Short-Term Effects (Temporary while using)

Problems with your:

- Memory, learning, concentration and attention .
- Motivation levels.
- Mood (making feelings of sadness or depression worse).

These can have a real effect on day-to-day activities and impact how much life can be enjoyed. Getting help and support to reduce or stop cannabis use is really important. The earlier positive change is made, the better this will be for brain development and mental health. Regardless of the level of use or length of use - it's never too late to make a positive change.

Long - Term Effects (Lasting damage caused)

It is easy for occasional use to creep up over time making it more difficult to stop. Heavy use of cannabis could lead to:

- Lasting learning and memory problems.
- Increased risk for serious mental health problems.



Cannabis and Mental Health

- » Cannabis **reduces control** over emotions, behaviour and decisions.
- » Cannabis can **make existing mental health difficulties worse**.
- » Cannabis use can also **trigger new mental health problems**.
- » Research suggests that daily cannabis users are 4 times **more likely to develop Psychosis** (this can include hearing voices, seeing things that are not there, or feeling very paranoid).
- » Cannabis can make depression or anxiety worse.
- » Young people who smoke cannabis regularly are **three times more likely to attempt suicide** than people who never use cannabis.

I've heard Cannabis is safe?

There has been much information shared on social media and other platforms about cannabis or calls for cannabis to be legalised or used as a 'medicine'. This can be confusing.

The first thing you can do when you hear confusing information, is to use trusted sources of information to help you make a decision - e.g. from your Health Service (HSE.ie, Drugs.ie), Government (gov.ie) or from a qualified health professional. We have used these in developing this leaflet.

Everybody wants to live their best life. Avoiding cannabis can help with staying, healthy and sharp minded.

If you are struggling with health or mental health problems, talk to a trusted adult or professional to explore new ways of coping and overcoming problems you might be finding hard to deal with.



To find out more information visit:
www.drugs.ie/drugtypes/drug/cannabis

Support & Information

If you are concerned about your own drug use or need support for someone you know, please contact:

Alcohol Forum Ireland
Unit B9, Enterprise Fund Business Centre
Ballyrairie
Letterkenny
Co. Donegal

T: 074 91 25596

E: info@alcoholforum.org

www.alcoholforum.org

HSE Drug and Alcohol Helpline

Tel: 1800 459 459

Text: 'Hello' to 50808 – free, anonymous, 24/7 messaging service

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MaCYSS is an initiative of Alcohol Forum Ireland

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Youth Substance Support



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