



## Harm Reduction Strategies: Marijuana Use



Adapted from "Harm Reduction Psychotherapy" by Andrew Tatarsky, Ph.D.; Chapter 19, *The Pot Book: A Complete Guide To Cannabis*; Julie Holland, M.D., Editor, Park Street Press, 2010.

Harms, or negative consequences, from marijuana use **vary greatly from person to person**. Some users experience multiple and/or severe harms, and others, few or no harms. Below is a listing of some possible harms, along with some tips for reducing or eliminating them.

POSSIBLE HARMS	HARM REDUCTION TIPS
<p><b>Cognitive (brain) functioning</b> can be disturbed in the regions associated with learning, attention, concentration, memory, organization, and time sense. Activities that depend on these functions – such as academic homework and exams - can be disrupted for 24 hours or more after last use. After a period of daily marijuana use, it may take a month or more for the brain to return to normal functioning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid using marijuana before activities that require intact cognitive functioning such as homework, exams, classes, etc.</li> <li>• Don't use the day or night before an important or new challenge.</li> <li>• Try using smaller amounts and less often.</li> <li>• Take days or weeks off to reduce the THC buildup in your system.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Negative psychological reactions</b> to marijuana may include anxiety, paranoia, a feeling of losing touch with reality, hallucinations, and being flooded by troubling thoughts. People with depression and/or anxiety should be aware that marijuana can cause your symptoms to be worse. Some research has suggested that marijuana may cause schizophrenia to emerge in vulnerable people. Marijuana can reduce the effectiveness of antidepressants and other psychopharmaceutical medications.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't mix marijuana with other drugs – including alcohol- which can intensify negative effects.</li> <li>• Use only in a safe place with trusted friends.</li> <li>• Talk with your health care provider about how your medications may interact with marijuana.</li> <li>• Take a break from marijuana to determine if it is interfering with the ability of your medication to work properly.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Motor impairment and slowed reaction time</b> increase the risk of accidents while driving and using machinery. Recent studies have shown that drivers whose THC/blood concentrations are 5 ng/ml – implying marijuana use within the past one to three hours - experience an elevated risk of accident compared to drug-free controls. Engaging in the simultaneous use of both marijuana and alcohol can significantly increase the risk of accident compared to the consumption of either substance alone.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not drive or operate dangerous machinery while smoking marijuana.</li> <li>• Do not drive or operate dangerous machinery after combining marijuana and alcohol use on the same occasion.</li> <li>• Wait at least 3 hours after last use of marijuana before driving or operating dangerous machinery.</li> <li>• Be aware that there may be a hangover effect the day after heavy smoking.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Cannabis dependence syndrome</b> occurs in an estimated 10% of marijuana users. Risk increases as frequency and length of use increase. Marijuana dependence can interfere with work or school performance, relationships, and mood. It can reduce creativity, cause self-esteem problems (feeling like a “stoner”), and result in social withdrawal. Physical addiction to marijuana use is possible, and users can experience withdrawal symptoms when marijuana use is discontinued.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep track of your marijuana use in order to become more aware of your patterns.</li> <li>• Be specific with yourself about what changes you would like to make in your marijuana use (how often, when, where, why, etc.).</li> <li>• Take a 30 day break from marijuana use. This enables the system to clear out the THC, reduce tolerance, and get over the discomfort of withdrawal that some people feel when stopping.</li> <li>• Monitor urges for using and try to sit with them. This is called “urge surfing”.</li> <li>• Dialogue with the urge. Ask yourself if this is a moment to use that is in accord with your new goals.</li> <li>• Review your reasons for deciding to make a change, in order to stay connected to your motivation.</li> <li>• Identify what is triggering the urge to use, and consider different strategies for addressing, managing, or expressing your triggers.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Infectious diseases</b> such as mononucleosis and stomach viruses are passed in saliva, and can be spread through the sharing of smoking devices.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don’t share joints or bongs.</li> <li>• If sharing, don’t let the joint touch your lips. Clean the bong or pipe before smoking from it.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lung Problems</b> such as lung congestion, coughing, chronic bronchitis, and precancerous change are related to smoking. Water pipes may send higher concentrations of tar to the lungs because of the tendency to hold the smoke in longer. These effects are compounded when tobacco is mixed with marijuana.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid water pipes or bongs.</li> <li>• Eat cannabis products or drink cannabis tea to eliminate smoking related harms. Use caution, because it is harder to gauge the amount you are taking this way and the effects can last longer and be much more intense than with smoking.</li> <li>• Don’t mix marijuana with tobacco.</li> <li>• Don’t inhale deeply or hold the smoke long. Deep inhalation will deliver more carbon monoxide and other toxic by-products to your brain.</li> <li>• Vaporizing heats rather than burns the cannabis material. Initial research indicates that vaporizing cannabis reduces (but does not completely eliminate) the toxic by-products of burning the plant material.</li> </ul>