



Cannabis

Is cannabis legal yet?

In the UK – No.

It is legal, or pretty much legal in a lot of places, but not here – there's more on the law, and the reclassification of cannabis on page 11.

What is cannabis?

Cannabis is a member of the hemp family of plants. Hemp grows in many places, and has been used for thousands of years for bird seed, animal feed, as a medicine, to make paper, lamp oil, rope, clothing and many more products. Hemp can be legally grown for the manufacture of commercial products including clothing, providing the THC content is below 0.3% (too low to get you stoned).

There are four sub species of cannabis – sativa, indica, ruderalis and rasta.

What is it in cannabis that gets you stoned?

The two main active compounds in cannabis are **THC** (tetrahydrocannabinol) and **CBD** (cannabidiol). All cannabis has both chemicals, but the degree to which they are present varies a lot.

So, what are the effects?

THC alone produces more of a soaring, psychedelic, spacey high that can be almost amphetamine like in the clarity of its effects. **CBD seems to increase the depressant qualities of THC** and diminish the stimulant-like qualities. It also has the effect of delaying the onset of the high, producing the 'creeper' quality that some cannabis has.

Herbal cannabis, especially skunk, usually has a very high proportion of THC to CBD, which is why the best grass produces a clear, speedy psychedelic high. Cannabis resin, on the other hand, has much larger amounts of CBD in, thereby producing the narcotic, stupefying effects associated with strong hash.

The main effect is one of a dreamy, warm, elevated mood, or a 'don't give a fuck' mellow sort of 'chilling out' (Roget's Thesaurus is of little help when describing drug experiences). Colours and sounds are often enhanced, time can appear distorted and the mind confused and prone to flights of ideas. Other effects include: 'the giggles'; just giggling at anything; babbling; talking nonsensically, often forgetting what's been said and the 'munchies', a sudden ravenous appetite often involving large quantities of chocolate. For some people cannabis works as an aphrodisiac.

Negative effects include nausea and vomiting which are particularly common when alcohol has been consumed before smoking, and anxiety / paranoia, (people are talking about me, strangers have hostile intentions, are undercover police etc.).

The absentmindedness and loss of rational thought patterns are disliked by some people, although others say they enjoy it. Some cannabis users experience 'whities' – a dizzy feeling like they are about to pass out (some actually do, though it's usually brief).

How is it taken?

When cannabis is smoked, the effects start within minutes although the full effect takes about 15 minutes to come on and lasts about an hour, slowly tapering off over the next hour provided further doses are not taken.

Although cannabis is usually smoked, it can be eaten (usually in cakes or mixed with fudge) or drunk in tea or wines.

Cannabis is not water soluble, so it has to be dissolved in either alcohol or fat if you are attempting to make either of the above.

Eating cannabis means that the effects take longer to come on (up to an hour) and can seem more intense. **First time users often find it difficult to realise they are stoned and will often say it has had no effect as they giggle at their shoelaces.**

What's the difference between hashish and marijuana?

Cannabis is a generic term used to describe the various preparations and forms the plant appears in. **The Mexican term marijuana, though strictly describing the flowering tops of the plant, is used in many countries to describe the leaves and just about every other part of the plant** except the roots (often just called 'grass' or 'weed').

Hashish or hash is the resin that is exuded from the leaves and flowering tops of the plant and then prepared into a block, ranging in texture from plasticine, to hard clay and in colour, from black or brown to green and even yellow.

Skunk

Cannabis plants are usually male or female (although some are both). Male plants aren't grown because they give off pollen, and if a female plant is around it will become fertilised by the male and start to produce seeds, devoting less of its time to produce flowers (the most potent part of the plant). If the female is unfertilised it will not produce seeds but will produce more flowers.

Sinsemilla or skunk is the unpollinated flowers of the female plant (sinsemilla is Spanish for 'without seed').

Modern growing technology has seen the development of various hybrid plants. The most famous sativa/indica (sativa-dominant) hybrid was originated in the USA, the legendary Skunk no. 1 – as was the second most famous hybrid, Northern Lights an indica-dominant hybrid.

Since the 1990s, the genetic material from these legendary strains of marijuana has been available in Europe via Dutch seed dealers (known as 'netherweed').

Many of these strains are being cultivated domestically in the UK, usually just called 'skunk'. If grown properly, there will be no real difference between the British and Dutch variety, as the skunk grown here and the skunk grown over there usually comes from the same seed stock, and is grown using the same techniques.

Yer, but what's it like?

In Britain, the average THC content (the main active drug) in cannabis is about 5% for resin, and 9% for herbal cannabis. **The average THC content of skunk is around 14%! In short, skunk is about three times as strong as hash.**

The effects can almost make it seem like a mild dose of LSD rather than cannabis – distortions of reality rather than hallucinations. People who smoke skunk can often be found silently looking at nothing in particular (the thousand yard stare) for hours on end. Skunk can often ruffle even experienced cannabis smokers; it should be treated with the utmost respect.

But it should be remembered that the other cannabinoid in cannabis that affects the high – cannabidiol (CBD) – is mainly present in cannabis resin (averaging 3.5% CBD), with herbal cannabis and skunk generally containing less than 0.1% CBD (virtually nothing).

What are those long cigarette papers for?

According to the manufacturers king size cigarette papers are produced for long distance lorry drivers who may not be able to stop frequently enough to satisfy their nicotine craving with the standard sized papers. Urm?

Why do people disagree about the dangers ?

Drug use has become a big moral and political issue – and research into cannabis does not take place in a moral vacuum.

Whilst good research tries to be neutral, some doesn't try, and even the results of good research can be interpreted to suit opposing views. **Dangers are over exaggerated to a ridiculous degree by people who have a political or moral aversion to drugs, whilst those who are more pro-drugs tend to ignore any evidence suggesting possible harm.**

In this FAQ we will, of course, be completely fair and balanced (but we would say that wouldn't we?).

So, is cannabis completely safe?

There is no such thing as a drug that is completely safe for everyone, all the time: there is nothing in this life that doesn't carry some type of risk – the real question is how risky is cannabis?

- You will not die from an overdose of cannabis.
- Despite what is reported in the UK media, there is still no proof that cannabis causes schizophrenia in people who wouldn't have had it anyway, but there is evidence that it can make it start earlier in people's lives, and make it worse.
- Smoking tobacco causes serious health problems

There have been twenty-five years of research attempts to find an 'amotivational syndrome' (the drug makes you lazy and unmotivated); nothing has been found. Having said that, people who spend most of their lives stoned are unlikely to win the Queens Award for Industry.

- **Cannabis does not lead to the use of other drugs any more than cigarettes or rock 'n' roll: the 'gateway drug' theory is just something that people who are anti-cannabis want to be true.**
- Cannabis affects short-term memory, but this effect is only temporary and only lasts whilst people are stoned. This can be a problem if you are stoned all the time.
- There is no evidence that cannabis causes infertility. However, chronic use of cannabis has been alleged to decrease sperm counts in men, and to suppress ovulation in women.
- Using cannabis whilst pregnant has been associated with low birth weight babies, although this is probably due to smoking tobacco. Pregnant women should avoid smoking both cannabis and tobacco.
- Cannabis smoke can be harmful to your windpipe and lungs. Smoking cannabis may worsen asthma. Although recent research has shown that cannabis smoke does not cause cancer in the same way that tobacco smoke does and even kills cancer cells, it still suggests that **long-term cannabis smoking may increase the risks of lung cancer, and bronchitis.**
- Research has shown that those who drive whilst intoxicated are more hesitant. Cannabis intoxication may increase the chances of you being involved in a road traffic accident. Smoking and driving is risky and driving whilst under the influence is a crime. It is now an offence to drive with cannabis above a specified level in your blood – just as it is with drink driving.

- Cannabis is not addictive in the classic sense of producing a withdrawal syndrome like heroin or alcohol, but it can produce a form of dependency in about one in ten regular users. On stopping, they often feel anxious or moody, lose their appetite, and/or have trouble sleeping and get very vivid dreams. These withdrawal symptoms last between a few weeks to a few months. People who smoke a lot tend to experience more problems giving up.
- People often smoke cannabis mixed with tobacco. Those that don't smoke cigarettes often report withdrawal symptoms that they put down to cannabis but in fact they are experiencing the problem of withdrawing from tobacco, which is a very addictive drug.
- **Although it might not seem like it sometimes, cannabis is still illegal.** Smoking cannabis can lead to problems with friends and relatives, and a conviction can cause problems with school, college or work, travel and housing.
- We have known for many years that people experiencing severe psychotic mental health problems (delusions, paranoia, and/or hallucinations) who smoke cannabis (or use other drugs like alcohol, amphetamine or even cigarettes) can become more ill, and take more time to recover from their illness than those who don't use drugs.

Cannabis and mental health problems

Cannabis can 'trigger' (start off) schizophrenia in those people who would develop it anyway, however, for the rest of the population the risk of serious mental health problems is not as serious as the press would have you believe.

Although it is true that people who smoke cannabis are more likely to develop schizophrenia, people who develop schizophrenia are also more likely to smoke cannabis and take other drugs.

The government's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs conducted a review of the evidence in 2005 and concluded: ***“the use of cannabis makes (at worst) only a small contribution to an individual's risk of developing schizophrenia.”***

Either way there is still a risk, even if that risk is small, so, **if you don't want to take the risk – don't fucking smoke it!**

- Cannabis can cause a 'toxic psychosis' in which people become very disorientated and mentally confused. However, this is rare and usually happens when cannabis is eaten and usually inexperienced users and/or people with underlying mental health problems. In any case the effect is temporary, disappearing within a few days to a few weeks with or without medical assistance.
- Panic attacks, anxiety and paranoia can be brought on by cannabis use – however these are temporary, and only last whilst people are intoxicated. **Some cannabis users experience long term anxiety, and although they may feel like the cannabis is helping to calm them, it is probably making things worse.**

Does smoking cannabis make me a bad person?

Surprisingly, this is a frequently asked question for people who do seek help from drug agencies for problems with cannabis. Leaving the legal implications of cannabis aside, it is a question you can only answer for yourself, and is a question a drug worker would explore with you to discover the underlying feelings that led you to ask such a question, but I'll give you a hint: **the answer is NO.**

How long can it be detected in the body, and can you beat the piss test?

Urine tests for cannabis aren't looking for the drug itself, they are detecting the chemicals it turns into when the body breaks it down. With cannabis, these chemicals stay in the body far longer than those of pretty much all the other drugs.

A single dose of cannabis is detectable for up to a week after use; long-term heavy use of cannabis can be detected for far longer. This can be months after the last time it was taken; it all depends on what kind of test is used. If you go into prison they give you 30 days grace before you can be urine tested as they say that the testing equipment they use is calibrated to detect for up to four weeks after the last time you used.

There are a number of different testing methods used and a number of methods used to try and beat the tests. Some people often drink large amounts of liquid to dilute their urine in the hope of beating the urine test.

The only sure-fire way of beating the hair test is shaving your body completely, although washing hair frequently with shampoo has been tried by some people. Blood testing is rarely used as this is often thought to be too intrusive (by employers). Saliva tests are becoming increasingly popular and involve taking a smear from your mouth. Of course there are false positives and even passive inhalation could theoretically cause a positive result, but unfortunately there is simply no guaranteed way of beating any test.

Is it dangerous to mix cannabis with other drugs?

The most common effect of mixing cannabis with other drugs is vomiting. This is usually just unpleasant. Obviously if someone passes out there is a risk

that they could choke on their own vomit: put them in the recovery position. Cannabis does not profoundly affect the heart or breathing, so combining it with other drugs, whilst not advisable, is not life threatening.

Is cannabis a useful medicine?

Over the years, cannabis has been used for numerous medical reasons from flatulence relief in ancient Greece, to helping with the period pains of Queen Victoria. It is claimed that, among other things, cannabis reduces nausea in patients receiving chemotherapy, stimulates appetite in AIDS patients, and relieves symptoms of glaucoma and multiple sclerosis.

Sativex is a mouth spray containing chemical extracts from the cannabis plant and is licensed in the UK for some multiple sclerosis patients, but is not widely available on the NHS.

Will I still do well in my exams if I smoke loads of cannabis while I'm revising?

No.

So what about these changes to the law?

Cannabis was a class B drug, became a class C for a short while and in 2009 went back to being a class B drug. The maximum penalty for possession of a class B drug is five years imprisonment, compared to two years for class C drugs – however, producing or dealing class B or class C drugs attracts the same maximum penalty: 14 years imprisonment, although sentences like that are only ever given to repeat offenders and/or people with kilograms of dope.

What happens if I get caught in possession of cannabis and I'm over 18?

The Misuse of Drugs Act, 1971 makes it an offence to either possess or to traffic in cannabis. If you are aged 18 or over and you are caught with a small amount of cannabis, in most cases (provided you admit to it) the police simply take your name and address, confiscate your cannabis, and send you on your way with a Cannabis Warning.

But you can still be arrested and charged with possession if you are caught near a school, or with a large amount, or if you are uncooperative.

If you are caught in possession of cannabis for a second time, you will receive a 'penalty notice for disorder' (PND) – which means that the police will issue you with a £90 spot-fine (a bit like getting a parking ticket). **People caught in possession of cannabis more than two times will either be cautioned at a police station (a formal written warning) or prosecuted in court (where they will most likely receive a fine).**

If you are arrested and taken to a police station you will be charged with possessing cannabis and probably be given a caution. Possession is where the police catch you with a small amount in your car, pocket, bag, house etc. and they do not believe you intend to sell it.

A caution is where you are taken to a police station and your details are taken; you are then released without any further action being taken. The caution will stay on police records and can be brought up in court if you are caught again, so in that sense it still counts as a criminal record. To get a caution you have to admit the offence. If you don't admit the offence you will be charged. If you are charged it is best to answer all questions as 'no comment', and ask to speak to a solicitor. There are duty solicitors provided for free if you cannot pay for one. If you really are not guilty, say so and ask for a solicitor.

Although a caution is the most common way of dealing with possession of cannabis there is no guarantee that is what you will get. If you did get charged and went to court you will most probably get a fine; it is very unlikely that you will go to prison for possession alone. However, if you go to court and are found guilty you could lose your job (if you are a train driver, school teacher or Blue Peter presenter); at best it may cause difficulties in both career prospects and in many other aspects of future life.

Growing your own plants for personal use is not a high priority for some police forces, while for others it's treated more seriously than possession alone.

If the police believe there is 'intent to supply' they may charge you, even if there is no evidence of actual supply.

Other charges include conspiracy or incitement to any of the above, and allowing one's premises to be used for smoking cannabis.

What happens if I get caught by the police and I'm under 18?

Unfortunately you may still be arrested and taken to a police station. You will usually be given a Youth Caution which is similar to a caution. However, if you have already received a Youth Caution, you will probably be given a Youth Conditional Caution (YCC). A YCC means you will be sent to see a Youth Offending Team (YOT) for a set period of up to 12 weeks. You might also get visits to your home from social services (this is more likely the younger you are). If you have already had a YCC you will almost certainly be charged with possession and have to appear in court. In all cases with under 18s your parents or carers will be informed if you are arrested. Your parents/guardian or a social worker should be present the whole time you are questioned.

What happens if I get caught by somebody else?

If you are a parent, youth worker or schoolteacher and you find somebody with an amount of cannabis you are under no obligation to inform the police.

You can dispose of the drug by flushing it down the toilet. It is always better to get a witness to you doing this and you should check if there are any policies or procedures from your employer for dealing with incidents like this. It is often the case that young people get into far less trouble if they are caught by a police officer outside the school gates than by a schoolteacher inside the school. In most cases a school will inform your parents. With a youth worker/doctor etc, it would depend on the circumstances and what sort of confidentiality policy they have.

Would you like to patronise me?

Moi? If you take two people: one smokes cannabis when they feel like getting stoned, have a variety of interests and a variety of friends, some of whom smoke cannabis, some who don't. The other one smokes cannabis all the time, is always stoned and all their friendships are based on smoking weed to the point where their entire life revolves around skinning up a fat one. Which one would you like to be stuck in a lift with (and no, neither has any cannabis on them)?

As with any pleasurable activity, smoking weed can take up an ever growing part of your social life, sometimes at the expense of other activities. This may become a problem for some people in the sense that it can lead to a self-imposed limiting of one's personal horizons.

Is sitting around smoking weed preventing you from starting the next Virgin records, becoming Oldham's answer to Gwyneth Paltrow, or the next David Cameron? ... Urm, pass the reefer man, quick!

Any top tips for managing cannabis use?

- **Avoid regular, heavy consumption.** Have days when you don't use, or restrict smoking to evenings or weekends.
- **Avoid using potent cannabis strains** like skunk all the time.
- **Avoid paranoia by not going out stoned to places or with people you are uncomfortable with,** or are likely to make you anxious.
- **Be discreet when buying, carrying or using cannabis.**
- If you want to get your cannabis use under control, **try to have more contact with your friendship networks that are not based entirely around smoking dope.**
- **Be honest with yourself;** if your use of cannabis is getting to be a problem, try and cut down or stop for a while; if you have a problem doing this ring a drug service for advice.

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To provide information on the nature and effects of cannabis in a question and answer format.

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