

Cannabis: What Parents/Guardians and Caregivers Need to Know

This fact 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.



Bottom Line

- 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.
- Cannabis will still be illegal for anyone under the age of 19 in Ontario, even after legalization.
- Youth are especially vulnerable to the effects of cannabis since brain development is not complete until about the age of 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 and pot, is a drug that comes from a plant with common strains that include Cannabis sativa and Cannabis indica. It consists of dried flowers, fruiting tops and leaves that are greenish or brownish. Different ways to use cannabis include: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 cannabis 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 hash.

In Ontario, about 1 in 5 students (or 19%) in grades 7 to 12 say they used cannabis at least once in the past year.² Among this group, most used a bong, joint or edibles.² It is important to remember that 81% of students report that they have not used cannabis at all in the past year.

How does cannabis make you feel?

Cannabis contains THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), a chemical that causes the mental and physical effects known as feeling “high”.¹ Cannabis can make some people feel relaxed and happy, but it can also cause confusion, drowsiness, forgetfulness, panic, delusions and distorted perceptions.³ Studies show that the average potency of THC in cannabis today is almost 10% higher than 30 years ago.⁴

When cannabis is smoked or vaporized, the effects begin right away and last at least six hours. The effects of edibles may begin between 30 minutes and two hours after taking them, and can last 12 hours or longer.³ Although edibles don’t harm the lungs and respiratory system like smoking cannabis, it can take longer for their effects to be noticed. This can cause a person to consume more in a short amount of time, intensifying the effects.⁵

What does cannabis legalization mean for youth?

In Canada, recreational cannabis is currently illegal and subject to criminal charges.⁶ Later in 2018, the federal government intends to regulate and legalize recreational cannabis (i.e., for non-medical purposes) in Canada.⁷ In Ontario, adults who are 19 years or older will be able to buy and use recreational cannabis purchased from government-regulated Ontario Cannabis Stores.⁸ Consuming recreational cannabis will not be allowed in public places, such as workplaces, and schools, or within cars.⁸

For youth under the age of 19 in Ontario, it will be illegal to grow, possess, buy, sell, or share cannabis.⁸ There will be penalties for youth and adults who give or sell cannabis to minors including fines and jail time.⁸ Strict rules will also be in place for drug-impaired driving among youth.⁸

Even after recreational cannabis becomes legal for adults over 19 years of age, most Ontario students (62%) in grades 7-12 say that they do not have plans to try cannabis.²



Did You Know?

There is a range, or spectrum, in how people use substances:^{9,10}

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.^{9,10}

Problematic use – is substance use that causes negative health and social consequences.^{9,10} 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.¹⁰ A young person may be showing an addictive relationship with cannabis if they feel unable to control or reduce their use.

What are the unique risks of cannabis use for youth?

Trying cannabis is unlikely to cause serious problems, but even occasional use has harms. For instance, driving after using cannabis may double the risk of having a car accident.¹¹ Youth who use cannabis early and often for months or years, are at risk of long-term health and social problems.^{1,3,4} Here are a few examples:

- **Increased risk of harm to the brain** – such as problems with memory, concentration, thinking, learning, handling emotions, and decision-making.^{3,4}
- **Increased risk of 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.^{1,3,4}
- **Difficulties with relationships** – at home, school or work.³
- **Physical health harms** – including lung and respiratory problems from smoking cannabis.³
- **Addiction** – cannabis can be addictive, especially for youth.⁴

What are the signs my child may have a problem with cannabis or other substances?^{1,12}

- 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.
- Being secretive or dishonest.
- Changing sleep habits, appetite, or other behaviors.
- Borrowing money or having more money than usual.

It is sometimes hard to detect a problem with cannabis use. Some signs of a cannabis problem can look like typical youth behaviour.¹⁴ Talk to your child and find out if there's a problem.



What can I do to help prevent cannabis from doing harm to my child?



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.¹³



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



Be positive: When talking about cannabis, avoid trying to frighten, shame or lecture your child.¹⁴ 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



Focus on safety: Let your child know about safer choices when it comes to cannabis and work with them to establish limits and understand consequences.^{1,14} 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: Your child may be learning about substances in school and through other parts of their lives. Be prepared with facts about cannabis so you can respond to questions they may have.¹³



Be supportive: Youth use cannabis for many reasons: to fit in, to feel good, or to cope with stress.¹⁴ Be ready to help your child find healthier coping strategies or professional help if needed.¹⁴ See the section *Getting more information and help* to find resources to support you and your child.



Be an example: Reflect on your own use of substances. If you use alcohol as a stress reliever, you might be giving the message that substance use is an appropriate way to handle life's challenges.^{1,14} 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, how to respond to peer pressure, and how your child can reduce risks if they do use.

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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>
- 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 http://www.camh.ca/en/research/news_and_publications/reports_and_books/Documents/LRCUG.KT.PublicBrochure.15June2017.pdf
- 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 help can contact Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca

