



ncpic

national cannabis
prevention and
information centre

what's the deal on
quitting?

a **do-it-yourself guide**
to quitting cannabis

This booklet is designed to help you make changes to your cannabis use and to help you manage the sorts of problems you may face in the process. It may be used as a tool to help you change. You may choose to quit completely or first to try and control your cannabis use.

introduction

Cannabis is the product of the plant *cannabis sativa* and is used throughout the world. In Australia it is most commonly smoked in a water-pipe (bong) or a joint. The compound THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) is responsible for most of its psychoactive effects, although it also contains many other chemicals, including other cannabinoids. Cannabis smoke contains more carcinogens than tobacco smoke, deposits a third more tar and is thought to be a risk factor for a number of cancers as well as respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.

The effects of cannabis vary and are related to factors in the person, their surrounding environment and the potency of the drug. While cannabis has many unique properties, like any drug, you can become dependent on it, physically and psychologically.

Many people can use cannabis occasionally without developing serious problems. Some people, however, find it more difficult to cut down or quit in the same way as those with alcohol or other drug problems. It is well known that by learning what situations trigger the use of cannabis, and using the practical tips recommended in this booklet, people can successfully cut down or quit.

This booklet will take you step by step and help you achieve your goal. There are two questions to answer:

- **do I have a problem with cannabis?**
- **how do I change?**

Every journey starts with a first step. This booklet will help you find out the strategies that work best for you. As you discover your strengths and weaknesses in managing your cannabis use you will develop new skills and interests to replace the role you believe cannabis plays in your life. If you have the desire to change, and work towards your goal in a careful and strategic way, it will work for you.

do I really have a problem with cannabis?

Although cannabis has some unique properties, the way in which dependence develops is quite similar to other drugs. Using on most days over a considerable period of time usually results in certain physical and psychological changes. After smoking for many years or smoking heavily, you may have found that you now need to smoke more than you used to in order to get the same feeling, or even just to feel OK. People using cannabis heavily often report difficulties in a number of areas of their life, such as: financial problems, problems in their relationships with their partner, family and friends, difficulties managing work commitments, physical health problems – especially with their chest, and psychological problems such as depression and anxiety.

In general, the symptoms of dependence are:

- using in larger amounts or for longer than intended
- a persistent desire to use and/or unsuccessful efforts to control use
- spending a great deal of time obtaining, using and recovering from use
- important activities are given up or reduced
- continuing use despite knowledge of physical or psychological problems associated with that use
- tolerance (needing to use more of a drug to get the same effect)
- withdrawal (unpleasant symptoms when you stop)

Although having some of these problems may not mean that you are dependent, if you are concerned about your cannabis use you should consider markedly reducing or ceasing use.

The following questionnaire gives an indication of a person's severity of cannabis dependence. For each question, tick the box that best represents how you feel about your cannabis use. Add them up to get up your total score.

severity of dependence scale (sds)

Please complete the next 5 questions. They refer to the **last 3 months**.

Over the last 3 months:

1 Did you ever think your use of cannabis was out of control?

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Never or almost never | <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 |
| Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Often | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 |
| Always or nearly always | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 |

2 Did the prospect of missing a smoke make you very anxious or worried?

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Never or almost never | <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 |
| Sometimes | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Often | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 |
| Always or nearly always | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 |

3 Did you worry about your use of cannabis?

- | | | |
|--------------|--------------------------|---|
| Not at all | <input type="checkbox"/> | 0 |
| A little | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 |
| Quite a lot | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 |
| A great deal | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 |

4 Did you wish you could stop?

Never or almost never 0

Sometimes 1

Often 2

Always or nearly always 3

5 How difficult would you find it to stop or go without?

Not difficult 0

Quite difficult 1

Very difficult 2

Impossible 3

SDS score _____ /15

A score of three or more on the SDS indicates cannabis dependence. The higher the score the greater the likelihood and severity of dependence.

How does that look to you? Does that reflect your situation?

Even without being dependent, some people have problems with cannabis use, such as using it despite social problems (e.g. relationship or work problems) or using it in situations that may be dangerous such as driving or using machinery.

Whatever the issues, the choice to cut down or stop using cannabis is yours alone to make.

how do I change?

There are three basic steps to changing your cannabis use:

- **thinking (about your behaviour)**
- **planning (for the changes you want)**
- **acting (on your decision)**

thinking and preparing for change

Thinking about why you smoke cannabis and why you want to stop or change your use is an extremely important first step. It is important for you to understand some of the reasons behind your use of cannabis.

Some of the **positive** things ('pros') about your smoking may be:

- feeling good
- having fun and socializing with friends
- feeling of relaxation
- time out
- increased creativity
- enhanced senses
- focused awareness on a particular activity

There may also be some aspects of your cannabis use that are not so positive.

Some of the **not so good** things ('cons') about smoking may be:

short-term:

- anxiety and paranoia
- memory and concentration problems
- an increased risk of accidents – especially if you are also drinking alcohol
- odd/bizarre thoughts, extreme paranoia or hallucinations (e.g. hearing or seeing things that others do not). This is more likely among people with a personal or family history of mental illness

longer-term

- increased risk of airways diseases, including bronchitis, lung and mouth cancers. If you also smoke tobacco this risk is increased
- dependence – where inability to control use increases the exposure to the social and health harms of cannabis use
- financial problems
- feelings of social isolation – long-term smokers often report that they feel isolated, and don't mix with other people as much as they used to
- changes in motivation – people dependent on cannabis report it is hard to achieve their goals and regret wasted time and opportunities
- decreased concentration, memory and learning abilities
- very heavy cannabis use may affect fertility. THC can cross the placenta and passes into breast milk. Smoking cannabis can affect foetal growth and contribute to lower birth weight, which may place a baby's health and well-being at risk

recording your decision

Research shows that it helps to write down your reasons for making a change, looking at it from all angles. You might like to take a minute to write out your personal reasons for using cannabis and thoughts about change using the table below.

Rate each item on a scale of one to ten to indicate how important these are to you.

pros and cons of smoking

pros		cons	
<i>e.g. Relaxing</i>	4 /10	<i>Chronic cough</i>	1 /10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10

To get a further perspective, it is useful to record the pros and cons of changing or quitting. You may find that your reasons for change are not just the opposite of the reasons for smoking. This added information may help reinforce your decision for change.

pros and cons of change/quitting

pros		cons	
<i>e.g. More money</i>	6 /10	<i>Miss some smoking friends</i>	2 /10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10
	/10		/10

When reviewing these two lists, if you find that the pros of smoking outweigh the pros of change, then now may not be the right time for you to make a commitment to change. If so, come back to the booklet when you feel that the cons of smoking outweigh the pros of continued use – this is when you are more likely to be ready.



planning and getting started

Now it's time to decide how and what you are going to change; are you going to be quitting or cutting down?

You now need to make another list, a plan about how this change will occur.

There are many things that you can do in preparation for your big change, firstly:

- set a quit (or change) date. Make a plan of what you will do that will help you keep to it

Record your quit date here: _____

Simple strategies that are known to work for people include:

- ask a friend or relative to help – tell them about your plans and strategies for change and ask for their support
- reduce your other commitments as much as possible for the first couple of weeks
- think about what you are doing before you smoke – go back to the list you made about why you want to stop, delay your decision to smoke by distracting yourself and not acting on your craving
- remind yourself why you want to change
- plan ahead – write out a list about what you will do instead of smoking
- remind yourself of the benefits of not smoking
- plan on doing pleasurable things that do not involve smoking
- avoid high risk situations (see below) and people who smoke
- familiarise yourself with the tips for dealing with cravings
- list the people you know who don't smoke and spend more time with them in places where you have never smoked

identifying your high risk situations

High risk situations are those in which you usually smoke cannabis. Certain people and places act as a trigger to cannabis use by increasing cravings to smoke. Most cannabis smoking happens without planning or effort. This means that you must plan well ahead to make sure that you do not end up in a high risk situation.

Think about what those situations are for you, and develop a personal emergency plan and write it down.

Here are some examples of how you might deal with a high risk situation:

- leave or change the situation, e.g. avoid smoking friends for a few weeks, re-arrange the room you most commonly smoke in, remove all bongs, papers and cannabis-related paraphernalia
- put off the decision to smoke for 15 minutes. Most cravings are time-limited and you can 'ride it out'. Each time you do it successfully, you will find it easier the next time
- change the way you think about smoking. Cannabis is not a need – you can live without it, it is not like air, water and food
- do something else every time you feel like smoking that is unrelated to smoking, e.g. ring someone, go for a walk, read a book, go for a swim/skate/ride – anything you don't do while you smoke
- remind yourself every day of your successes to date. Read your book everyday to reinforce your progress e.g. "It has been 3 days and every day is a little easier, my chest is starting to feel better, my partner is really pleased, etc"
- have a list of 'emergency' numbers and call them: "I will call Dave who is supportive of my trying to change"

withdrawal

People who have been using cannabis heavily over a period of time sometimes experience some withdrawal symptoms when they stop. Withdrawal is typically relatively mild and short-term.

The most common symptoms are:

- irritability
- urges to smoke – cravings
- anxiety
- depression
- anger
- confusion

The physical symptoms may include:

- sleep problems
- restlessness
- loss of appetite
- tremors
- night sweats
- diarrhoea

Even though these symptoms may be uncomfortable they are not dangerous and will pass.

Withdrawal symptoms are positive signs. They actually show that the body is recovering and re-adapting to being no longer dependent on cannabis. They are **short term** and it is impossible for them to persist for a great length of time – most will gradually resolve within 7-10 days.

To manage withdrawal and the symptoms of craving, the following strategies are recommended:

- **distracting:** Try and think about something else, or do something, that will take your mind off your symptoms
- **delaying:** If you have an urge to smoke, delay your decision to act on this. The feeling will usually pass in about 15 minutes
- **de-catastrophising:** This means stop thinking that withdrawal is worse than it really is. Remind yourself this is not the end of the world and that the feelings will pass
- **de-stressing:** This is about relaxation. Do something that will help you relax e.g. go for a walk, have a warm bath, lie on the floor and listen to calm music

Most of the uncomfortable withdrawal symptoms will come and go, like your urges to smoke. Stick with it, they do pass. During this time try to eat well and get some exercise, as it will help. Try to get as much sleep as possible even though it may be difficult at first.

Another tip may be to gradually cut down in the week prior to quitting. This might mean gradually delaying the first smoke of the day by 4-5 hours each day or reducing the number of cones/joints by 20% each day. If you are unable to manage this, especially once you are stoned, you may be better off quitting 'cold turkey'. It helps to monitor the symptoms as it is very reinforcing to notice that they reduce in intensity quite quickly.

acting on your decision and making the effort to change

Once you have decided on why you want to change or quit and what your change strategy and date will be, review your list of strategies for dealing with high risk situations and the management of withdrawal and craving.

Then put it into action – just do it! Don't put it off again.

Remember the 4 Ds: delay, distract, decatastrophise and de-stress, and have a plan that suits you for all of these. Go over your list and plan the first day.

Review the list under 'planning and getting started' and make sure you have followed as many of those tips as possible. Here are some more things to consider:

- **beware of rationalisations:** Sometimes our mind tries to trick us into having a smoke by rationalisations such as “just one smoke I deserve it”, “it's a special occasion” and so on. Make a firm, positive statement to yourself reinforcing your decision to change and your desire for success
- **grief reaction:** Many people giving up drugs feel as though they have lost a friend. It may feel like this to you but such feelings do pass. You will feel invigorated as you discover new possibilities and opportunities as your length of cannabis-free time increases
- **reward yourself:** Plan on doing something special – e.g. buy something with the money you have saved from not smoking
- **review your progress:** At the end of every successful week you should reward yourself for a job well done. Even if you haven't reached every goal, think of the good things and be proud of them

one last word

relapse prevention

If you have had a lapse, don't beat yourself up and think of yourself as a failure. It is not a major crisis in your recovery and should be used as a learning experience. Review where you think it went wrong (such as going into a high risk situation without preparation) and see if there can be a more effective strategy for dealing with the trigger. Learn from the experience so you can do better next time.

e.g. **went to John's place where everyone was stoned and before I knew it I had a bong in my hand**

Some solutions might be

- avoid John for a little while
- think about the reasons I ended up at John's place when I know he is a heavy smoker
- practice delaying and distracting when I see John

If you find that you lapsed intentionally then go back to, and focus on, the reasons you decided to change in the first place and how important it is to you. Also remind yourself that each slip will lessen your chances of long-term success as the craving will increase rather than decrease and mean you have to work harder in the long run to achieve your goal.

Consider what you have to look forward to:

- more money and what you will do with it
- more time to do stuff you used to love doing before smoking took up your time
- getting more done
- having more energy
- more time to do the things you have always wanted to do

summary

Overcoming cannabis dependence or changing any behaviour is not an easy task, but it is not impossible. In fact, most people say that it was not as hard as they first feared. It takes commitment, effort and persistence. Try to have supportive, positive people around you, at least for the first 7 – 10 days.

If you have the desire to change, and work towards your goal in a careful and strategic way, it will work for you.

Becoming free of cannabis dependence will be a major reward in itself, but that is just the beginning. The opportunities that it brings may include the reward of the lifestyle that you have dreamed about and certainly owe yourself.

acknowledgements

This guide is based on experiences gained in the conduct of a randomised controlled trial of brief cannabis interventions by the staff of the National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre at NDARC.

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For more information contact:

**National Cannabis Information
and Helpline**

1800 30 40 50 (toll free)

Useful websites include the following:

**National Cannabis Prevention
and Information Centre**

www.ncpic.org.au

Family Drug Support

www.fds.org.au

**Alcohol and Drug Information
Network (ADIN)**

www.adin.com.au

Australian Drug Foundation (ADF)

www.adf.org.au

**Reachout – an interactive
website for young people**

www.reachout.com.au