



# cycles

## FACILITATOR'S GUIDE



An Educational Resource Exploring Decision Making  
and Marijuana Use among Young People

This program includes a film and this guide. They both benefitted from the input of many young people who provided timely and welcome feedback on early versions of the script, the interactive questions, and the film's credibility. We are particularly grateful for the input from our stakeholder partner, Vancouver-based SACY (School Aged Children and Youth).

Our research findings have underscored that judging young people for their choices regarding marijuana is not helpful – instead, engaging in meaningful discussion contributes to more informed and healthful choices.

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# CYCLES

## Facilitator Guide Insert

The **CYCLES** facilitator guide and videos were originally developed in British Columbia in 2014, some of the links and resources may be specific to the province of B.C. and the content on legalization is out of date. The information included in this insert is specific to Ontario and was last updated on 2019/01/24.

### Ontario Health and Physical Education (H&PE) Curriculum – Grade Level Recommendations

**CYCLES** was designed for grades 8 to 12. The majority of research suggests that prevention education is most effective prior to initial use as well as around the time of first exposure, which is most common at 15 years of age. Harm reduction strategies in education are most effective with youth in the senior grades of high school and older and with youth who may be using cannabis.

#### Critical Thinking

Ask students what they liked and what they thought could be improved about the film and the activities. To promote ongoing dialogue, encourage students to elaborate on the film's shortcomings and to propose alternatives to the plot or script. This may include student suggestions on the appropriate target grade for this lesson and open discussion on whether the film portrayed authentic, relatable, and diverse content. Consider expanding upon critical thinking by discussing media literacy in future lessons. Ask students to identify and challenge misleading media messages about substances, like cannabis, and help youth to recognize the power of advertising.

#### Harm Reduction

Ask senior students and students who may be using cannabis about the safer ways that cannabis can be used if someone is using cannabis, to lower the risks to health. Draw from the [Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines](#) and the [Blunt Truth](#).

#### Cannabis Laws and Regulation

For information and updates on the laws and regulations that apply to non-medical and medical cannabis in Ontario and Canada, please consult with your school's public health nurse. You can also access the following links for more information:

- [Ontario Educator's Page](#)
- [Canada](#)

#### Connecting School to Home

You may decide to notify parents and families of the upcoming **CYCLES** lesson and to provide them with resources on how they can talk to their teen about substance use, including cannabis use.

- [Cannabis Talk Kit](#)
- [You, Your Teen and Substance Use](#)
- [Triple P Parenting](#)
- [Information for Parents on the Legalization of Non-Medical Cannabis](#)

#### For more information:

See the [Cannabis Communication Guide for Youth Allies](#) and visit the health unit educators page for more resources on [substance use, addictions, and related behaviours](#).

# CYCLES Backgrounder

CYCLES is an educational resource exploring decision making and marijuana use among young people. Why marijuana use? Because marijuana is a drug with a confusing status: it is widely used by the public, it is sanctioned for the treatment of a number of medical conditions, and yet in Canada it is currently an illicit substance. Although many young people use marijuana, the role of this drug in their day-to-day lives is often not addressed by the adults around them or in drug education programs. In order to bridge that gap, a team of researchers at UBC School of Nursing produced a short film, CYCLES, that focuses on high school students' decision making around marijuana use.



CYCLES features a fictional drama, in the form of a short film, that draws on earlier qualitative research projects focused on marijuana use among young people. Initially, we conducted an ethnographic study focused on the cultural and contextual factors that shape the practice of frequent marijuana use in three communities in British Columbia. In a more recent study, we worked with a group of high school students to better understand how they sorted through the scientific evidence related to marijuana and its harms and benefits.

The storyline in the CYCLES film is grounded in key findings from this earlier research:

- There is a lack of open and balanced discussion about marijuana use within school communities
- Young people use marijuana for different reasons but have few opportunities to engage in relevant dialogue with adults
- The complexities of young people's decision making about marijuana use are rarely discussed in a supportive atmosphere that encourages self-reflection, which is a missed opportunity for learning
- Understanding reasons for marijuana use can foster meaningful dialogue that includes young people and members of the wider school community

These findings were also corroborated by a 2013 report by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, *What Canadian Youth Think about Cannabis*. The youth who participated in that study recommended increased focus on marijuana content in prevention programs, earlier delivery of prevention efforts, strong connections with youth by those delivering the prevention messages, and approaches aimed at reducing harms associated with marijuana use.

CYCLES is part of a knowledge translation project aimed at supporting balanced dialogue on the topic of decision making related to marijuana use. The project materials were pilot tested in over 50 Canadian settings. Facilitators' feedback on their experience of working with the film and the supportive materials was incorporated into the final materials.

**Note on language:** We chose to use the term "marijuana" in this manual, recognizing that many young people refer to it as "weed" or "pot" or other names, including its scientific name, *cannabis*.

# about the cycles Learning Resource

CYCLES is a film-based resource designed for use in a range of Grade 8 to 12 classrooms or other small group settings, whether the students have experience with marijuana or not. It is not intended for assembly-style use.

## About the film and follow-up materials

The plot of CYCLES revolves around two main characters, Olin and Lisa. We first meet Olin, age 17, as he is preparing to leave for school. Olin has been using marijuana for close to two years and he enjoys smoking it with his friends Andy and Doug. He is also skilled on his mountain bike. Lisa has recently moved into this community and is a newcomer at Olin's school. Soon after they meet, Olin and Lisa start to spend a lot of time together. At a party, Olin urges Lisa to take a toke of his joint, but she turns it down. Things change after Lisa's father suddenly leaves the family home. She begins to use marijuana to relax and to help her sleep. Over time, Lisa is using marijuana regularly, which impacts school and life beyond school.

The story in CYCLES is not a moral tale that focuses on whether choosing to use marijuana is good or bad. But it does invite the viewer to reflect on the consequences of the choices that the characters make, and at the same time rouses contemplation about personal decision making and the context of complex experiences.

The CYCLES film and follow-up materials are intended to inspire reflection on decision making related to marijuana use as well as the various consequences that may result from particular decisions. They encourage the viewer to consider different options during the decision making process and to give thought to how marijuana-related decisions might be affected by, or may impact, existing relationships. There is support in educational literature acknowledging how young people are more likely to learn when they are encouraged to think things through in a supportive manner.

## Educational objectives

- Increased awareness of the social and cultural differences in human relationships with marijuana
- Improved understanding of the social influences related to marijuana use and strengthened facility in participating in meaningful social interaction about marijuana
- Expanded knowledge base regarding the components of risk and potential ways to manage the personal and social risks associated with marijuana use
- Enhanced understanding of the importance of personal choices and values related to marijuana in managing personal well-being

# Things to Think About

- Experienced with marijuana or not, everyone can participate in and benefit from meaningful dialogue about marijuana. As a facilitator, you play a key role in guiding a discussion in which all young people can participate. You do not need to be an expert on the topic in order to support this discussion. Meaningful dialogue with young people about marijuana use can translate into informed decision making.
- Reflect on your own assumptions about marijuana. Some students may ask you about your past or present personal use of marijuana, so it can help to be prepared with a response you're comfortable with.
- Be familiar with resources in your school (e.g., school counsellors, youth workers, etc.) and resources available in your community (e.g., substance use services) in case a young person indicates they need some help.
- Regarding the possibility of triggering marijuana use, one young viewer captured the essence of the film, noting how, "it makes you want to smoke it, and then **not** smoke." There is no evidence that viewing a film like this will motivate a young person to try marijuana.
- The interactive version of CYCLES includes some questions related to connecting with personal feelings and emotions. The character Lisa is stressed about her parents' separation. Based on our experiences with viewing the film with dozens of young people, we have not found the content to cause distress. Many have commented that the storyline is "realistic."
- An experienced Vancouver-based counsellor who works with young people with substance use issues supports using these materials, adding, "I don't see any specific reason that some students should not watch it. It may be uncomfortable - but that is what is needed at times."
- Reading up on the latest research on marijuana may make you feel more comfortable in discussions with students or others. See the Marijuana Questions and Learn About Cannabis (Marijuana) sections at the end of this guide.



# Getting Started

1. Review the two versions of the film (available from [www.helpingschools.ca](http://www.helpingschools.ca)) and choose one to use in your classroom  
**Option 1:** 28 minutes, uninterrupted.  
**Option 2:** 34 minutes, interactive (film pauses in various places to give audience time to reflect on the decisions made by the characters).
2. Review the sample lesson plan and materials that match the version of film you chose. If desired, you may want to extend your lesson beyond 50-60 minutes to further explore the issues through discussion or other means. (See activities at the back of this resource for ideas.)
3. Make photocopies where necessary.
4. Consider the equipment you will need. If using a projector and large screen or wall, it is best to dim the lights to enhance the viewing. (Note: For the interactive version, some light is necessary in order to follow along with the worksheet questions during viewing.) If using a TV screen/monitor, keep in mind that two short scenes in the film include texting between the two main characters and may be difficult to read for those sitting far from the screen.





# Lesson Plan option 1

## Uninterrupted Version (50 - 60 minutes)

**Introduce your lesson on CYCLES.** Consider including these key points:

- This film is based on research projects at the University of British Columbia, School of Nursing, that have focused on teens in British Columbia who use marijuana frequently. Keep in mind that many high school students have *never* tried marijuana, and most who have tried marijuana do not use it regularly.
- While the main characters in the film *do* smoke marijuana, there are many young people in the film who *do not* smoke marijuana.
- The purpose of watching the film is to engage the viewer in balanced discussion about decision making and marijuana use, whether the viewer has personal experience with marijuana or not. There will be a discussion following the movie.
- Herbal cigarettes were used by actors during the filming, not marijuana. And some actors chose not to inhale!
- Dialogue in the movie includes some swearing by actors.  
  
\* Remind students you are available to debrief privately with anyone who wants to after class.

**Show the film and give the students a moment to reflect on what they watched.**

**Open a discussion with an open-ended question, such as:**

- What came up for you after viewing the film?
- What surprised you in the film?
- What stood out for you in the film?
- What did you like/not like?

**Continue the discussion using some of the questions on Page 8 as a guide.** You may wish to introduce the RICE system for healthy group discussion:

**R**espect for an individual's contributions, which we can demonstrate by listening to one another's views.

**I**nvolvement in the discussion and activities.

**C**onfidentiality, that personal matters revealed during discussion are not shared outside the group discussion.

**E**quality, as we acknowledge that everyone's experience and opinions are equally valid.

# Lesson Plan option 2

## Interactive Version (50 – 60 minutes)

**Introduce CYCLES.** Consider including these key points:

- This film is based on research projects at the University of British Columbia, School of Nursing, that have focused on teens in British Columbia who use marijuana frequently. Let's keep in mind that many high school students have **never** tried marijuana. Furthermore, most who have tried marijuana do not use it regularly.
- While the main characters in the film *do* smoke marijuana, there are many young people in the film who *do not* smoke marijuana.
- The purpose of watching the film is to engage the viewer in a balanced discussion about decision making and marijuana use, whether the viewer has personal experience with marijuana or not. There will be a discussion following the movie.
- Herbal cigarettes were used by actors during the filming, not marijuana. And some actors chose not to inhale!
- Dialogue in the movie includes some swearing by actors.

**Remind students** you are available to debrief privately with anyone who wants to after the lesson.

**Give each student an Interactive Questions Worksheet (Page 11) and explain the film's interactive element.** Here is a sample explanation:

*"The film pauses while questions and answers appear on the screen, matching your handout. Imagine how you would feel if you were Olin or Lisa (the two main characters), and what decisions you would make if you were in their place. It doesn't matter if you're a guy or girl, just put yourself in the lead actors' shoes and see how you would **feel** and **think** about what was happening, and what **you** would do. This is not meant to be a multiple choice test with one right answer. Instead, the different responses are included to get you to think about possibilities you may not have considered. Try to select one response. Make sure you work alone as this is about you and it needs to be **your** decision. If you have a different response, add it to the "other" category. How you respond is just an exercise to get you thinking. The worksheets will not be collected. Finally, it's best to not talk during the film so that you can really get into the story."*



**Show the film and give the students a moment to reflect on what they watched.**

**Open a discussion with an open-ended question, such as:**

- What came up for you after viewing the film?
- What surprised you in the film?
- What stood out for you in the film?
- What did you like/not like?

**Continue the discussion using some of the questions on Page 8 as a guide.** You may wish to introduce the RICE system for healthy group discussion:

**R**espect for an individual's contributions, which we can demonstrate by listening to one another's views.

**I**nvolve in the discussion and activities.

**C**onfidentiality, that personal matters revealed during discussion are not shared outside the group discussion.

**E**quality, as we acknowledge that everyone's experience and opinions are equally valid.

# Discussion Topics

## Reasons for marijuana use

- Why does Olin smoke marijuana? Is his use of marijuana helping him? If so, how?
- What about Lisa and Jaime? Why do they smoke marijuana? Is their use of marijuana helping them? If so, how?
- What are other reasons why some people choose to use marijuana?

**Note:** You may want to introduce the topic of medicinal marijuana currently legal in Canada for use by people living with some medical conditions such as multiple sclerosis, and people undergoing treatment for cancer (i.e., to address nausea).

## Consequences of marijuana use

- What were the consequences of Olin's marijuana use on the other people in his life? Consider the impact on Lisa, Olin's brother Jaime, his parents, his boss, the kids at the bike school.
- What losses did Lisa experience in the film and in what ways were these losses related to her use of marijuana? Consider factors such as her father leaving the family house, being kicked off the swim team, her mother taking her cell phone, her grades and her relationship with Olin.
- What are the potential consequences of relying on a substance such as marijuana to feel better?

## Recognizing problems with marijuana use

- What are some of the signs that Lisa is running into trouble with her marijuana use? Examples:
  - Saying that she really “needs” it
  - Using it to cope with what is going on in her life
  - Using it to get to sleep
  - Smoking marijuana on her own
  - Smoking marijuana at 10:00 a.m.
  - Skipping school to smoke marijuana
  - Grades are slipping since she started using pot
  - No longer involved in extracurricular activities that she used to enjoy
- Are there any signs that Olin is running into trouble with his marijuana use? Things to consider:
  - His “pattern” of smoking pot with his buddies
  - His grades that are “on the edge”
  - Too much marijuana the night before working that could have cost him his job
  - Questionable judgment when urging Lisa to smoke pot at the party
- Are there signs that Olin's friends, Doug and Andy, are running into problems with marijuana use?
  - Do they have to smoke marijuana in order to have fun with each other?
  - Do they smoke pot every day? Is regular use more risky than occasional use?

## Discussion Topics (Cont'd)

### Recognizing problems with marijuana use (cont'd)

- When Doug's car is fixed and they meet Olin in the laneway, Andy invites Olin to join them, saying that his "pipe" is ready. Are there risks with recent marijuana use and driving a vehicle?
- What, if anything, did you observe in Jaime's behaviour that might suggest a potential problem?
  - Taking marijuana from his older brother
  - Going into Olin's room to look for more
  - Not telling the truth when saying he was going to study
  - Joining two older guys smoking marijuana
- Is a young person's marijuana use (such as Jaime's) more likely to result in problems with marijuana? Why?
  - Is earlier use likely to result in a different pattern of use?
  - What do you know about the risks of marijuana use on the developing brain?
  - What is the association between starting marijuana use in early adolescence and school performance?
  - What is the relationship between regular marijuana use and motivation?
  - Were the interactions between Olin and Jaime something that you could relate to? If yes, how so?
  - What does it mean to you to be a role model to a younger person?

### Making positive changes

- What are some positive changes that we see Olin making in his life? Examples:
  - Deciding not to allow marijuana use to interfere with his job
  - Demonstrating to his friends that he could turn down smoking marijuana with them
  - Changing his marijuana use habit
  - Feeling good about his decisions



# More Learning Activities

## Activity 1: Role Play

The time allotted for this activity could vary based on the time that is available.

During the role play exercise, students have an opportunity to explore communication about decision making and marijuana use. They will work in small groups to write and perform a role play about one minute in duration.

1. Split the class into small groups of 4 to 6 people.
2. Hand out one role play scenario to each group (Page 15). This may mean that more than one group receives the same scenario.
3. Allow students five minutes to prepare their script.
4. The “actors” can read the lines from a sheet of paper (they don’t have to memorize them).
5. Ask each group to perform their role play. After each one, ask the group the following questions:
  - What did you think?
  - What did they do well?
  - Could they have done anything differently?

## Activity 2: Dilemmas (10 minutes)

Students practise giving advice on real-life dilemmas using what they know about decision making regarding marijuana use.

1. Split the class into groups of 4 to 6 students.
2. Distribute one of the dilemma worksheets to each group (Pages 16-18).
3. Explain that they have received a text message from their friend who is facing a dilemma and they must advise them what to do.
4. Allow five minutes for pupils to formulate a reply.
5. Ask a volunteer from each group to read the dilemma and their reply aloud, and then ask the whole class the following questions:
  - Do you think the reply was suitable?
  - Did they miss anything?

## Activity 3: Write a final scene (10 minutes minimum)

Ask the students to think about and write a concluding scene to the film. This activity could be done in a subsequent class such as English or Drama, or could be done following the screening if time permits. This also could be assigned as homework.

# Interactive Questions Worksheet

**1. If I were Olin, and Doug's car was working, would I let Doug drive me home?**

- No, it's dangerous to drive after smoking marijuana.
- It depends if Doug says he's okay to drive.
- Yes, people drive more carefully when they're stoned.
- Yes, as long as he hasn't smoked too much.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**2. If I were Olin, would knowing about the risks influence my marijuana use?**

- No, the risks are exaggerated.
- Yes, so I don't smoke it every day.
- No, I know lots of people who smoke more than me and they're fine.
- Not sure, it is hard to know what information to believe.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**3. If I were Olin, what would I be thinking?**

- I need to protect Jaime from using marijuana – he's just a kid.
- I tried it when I was his age – am I being a hypocrite?
- I should be with him the first time he tries it.
- I shouldn't wear headphones when I'm rolling joints.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**4. If I were Olin, would I ever suggest hanging out with my friends and not smoking weed?**

- No, hanging out with my friends includes weed.
- Yes, social time doesn't always include smoking weed.
- No, we just can't have fun without getting high.
- No, I don't want to say anything – they'd really wonder about me.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**5. If I were Olin, what would I do now?**

- Continue to smoke the joint while Lisa stays in the car.
- Apologize and put the joint out immediately.
- Ask Lisa why she's not into smoking marijuana.
- Suggest that she leave the car, smoke my joint, and then go back to the party.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**6. If I were Lisa, what would I want from Olin?**

- To distract me so I don't think about my problems.
- To be a good listener.
- To help me solve my problems.
- To stop smoking pot and focus on me.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**7. If I were Olin, how would I feel right now?**

- Concerned about Jaime's safety.
- Like a terrible role model.
- Pissed off that I need to find another hiding place for my stash.
- Worried that our parents just heard this conversation.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

**8. If I were Olin, what would I be thinking right now?**

- I'm worried about Lisa's pot use.
- Maybe I'm just overreacting.
- I should respect her choices and not say anything to her.
- I'm the one to blame.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Interactive Questions Worksheet (Cont'd)

### 9. Lisa says she could “really use” some marijuana. If I were Lisa, what else could I do to help me cope?

- Talk to my mother and tell her I'm going through a really rough time.
- Talk to a trusted adult – a counsellor, teacher, school nurse or other adult about what's bothering me.
- Nothing, it will pass.
- Talk with friends.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### 10. Olin is concerned about Lisa's anger - she seems really down. If I were Olin, what could I do instead of smoking pot with Lisa to help her cool down?

- Go for a walk together.
- Suggest Lisa talk with someone at school (e.g., a teacher or counsellor) to discuss how she's feeling.
- Tell Lisa how much I care about her and that I'll be there whenever she wants to talk.
- Leave her alone and give her some space.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### 11. If I were Olin, what would I do now?

- Stop using pot altogether.
- Use it only on weekends with friends when not working the following day.
- Look for another job.
- Smoke it anyway, but be more careful.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### 12. If I were Olin, what would I be thinking?

- I should join them - how can the Two Musketeers possibly have fun without me?
- I'm making a good decision about not smoking pot before work.
- Maybe Doug and Andy need to look at their own use of marijuana.
- What happened to me? Am I a loser?
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### 13. If I were Lisa, what would I be feeling?

- Pissed off that Olin isn't fun anymore.
- Wishing that Olin would ask me how I'm feeling instead of telling me what to do.
- Sad and abandoned that Olin doesn't seem to want to hang out.
- Confused and wondering about how I'm using pot.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### 14. If I were Olin, how would I be feeling?

- Responsible for how Lisa is now using pot.
- Troubled that Lisa has changed so much.
- Concerned about Lisa's health.
- Feeling like I messed up with a really great girl.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### 15. If I were Lisa, what would I think about the choices I've made about marijuana use?

### 16. If I were Olin, what would I think about the choices I've made about marijuana use?



# Role Play Scenarios Worksheet

## Scenario 1

You're at a party. You see your neighbour, Eric, out on the back deck. He's sharing a joint with his girlfriend who happens to be your best friend. Then, 30 minutes later, you see them both heading out the front door. Eric has car keys in his right hand and it looks like his recent marijuana use had an effect on him.



## Scenario 2

Last summer, you smoked weed a few times with your friend. Recently, you've noticed that your friend is now blazing a lot more often and starting to miss classes. You're concerned about what you are noticing. How do you talk to your friend? What do you say?



## Scenario 3

On your way home from school, you see your younger brother, Toni, smoking weed with a group of people. Toni is in Grade 8. You don't trust that group of older kids with your brother. What do you say to your brother?



## Scenario 4

Your father did the laundry last week and found a joint in your jeans pocket. You've never talked to your parents about smoking weed. What conversation do you have with your father?



## Scenario 5

You're at your buddy Tom's house, along with another friend, Max. Max has smoked a lot of weed and is starting to act strangely. You notice that he is really withdrawn and looking really nervous. When you speak to him, he says things that don't make sense. What conversation do you have? What do you do? Do you call anyone?



# Dilemma Worksheets

## DILEMMA WORKSHEET 1

*I trust you and have to tell someone. I'm stressed about school and haven't been sleeping well. And when I'm tired, it makes the stress even worse. I've tried weed and it's amazing, it really helps me fall asleep. Do you think it's okay to keep using it to help me get to sleep?*

—Jill

**Write a response to Jill. Does she have all the facts right?**

## DILEMMA WORKSHEET 2

*I'm wondering if my pot use is a problem. I am so down and that's why I haven't been hanging out. I've tried to quit before but it didn't work. What should I do?*

—Steve

**Write a response to Steve. What would you suggest that he should do?**

### DILEMMA WORKSHEET 3

*Thanks for being my peer mentor now that I'm in Grade 8 – I don't know who else to ask. Some older kids at our school just told me that weed is safe and nobody has ever died from an overdose. I've smoked up a few times – really like it. Is it okay to keep smoking it? Anything I should know?*

—Tanya

**Write a reply to Tanya. How do you respond to her questions?**

# Marijuana Questions

## Why do young people use marijuana?

Young people use marijuana for different reasons. For most young people, smoking marijuana is considered a “social thing.” Most often, Canadian youth describe using marijuana to experience the “high,” have fun and relax when with friends. Other young people indicate that they use marijuana “to feel better,” in other words, to manage feelings, cope with uncomfortable emotions and deal with life stresses. While doing so may seem to be effective in the short term, it is not a long-term solution without consequences. And it doesn’t address the core issue. It is true that most young people who smoke marijuana use it recreationally and do not encounter significant health problems related to their use; however, that is not the case for everyone.



## What about Medical Marijuana?

Unlike recreational marijuana, medical marijuana is legal and is prescribed by doctors for patients with certain medical conditions because of its therapeutic properties. It is effective in decreasing pain associated with arthritis, certain types of cancer and AIDS. It is beneficial in increasing appetite and preventing severe nausea. It also relieves symptoms for people with multiple sclerosis.

## How is marijuana use related to brain development?

Adolescence is a stage of life that involves physical and emotional development. It is important to note that brain development is not complete until adulthood. In fact, the brain is not fully developed until you’re nearly 25 years old. Increasingly, research evidence indicates that regular marijuana use during adolescence can interfere with specific brain development and can also lead to long-term defects in the parts of the brain involved with learning, attention, memory, problem solving, abstract thinking and motivation. This means that the younger a person is when they start using marijuana, the worse the cognitive impairment. In addition, there are greater changes in the structure of the brain the more heavily one uses marijuana and the younger one is when beginning to use it.

## Are there other risks associated with starting to use marijuana in early adolescence?

Starting to use marijuana in early adolescence is associated with negative outcomes. There is a link between “early initiation” of marijuana use and developing problems with one’s use. For example, frequent use, dependence and possible use of other drugs are associated with early initiation. For this reason, adolescence is a good time to delay experimenting with marijuana.



### What are the signs of problematic use of marijuana?

Early on, there can be signs suggesting problematic use of marijuana. Knowing what they are means that you can pay attention and take action before marijuana use becomes a more serious problem. Research indicates that frequency of use (i.e., how often one uses it) is one of the strongest predictors of problematic use. Warning signs of problematic use include: using it alone, using it daily, using it to cope with uncomfortable feelings, needing to increase the amount to get the same effect (i.e., tolerance), relying on it to get to sleep, and experiencing uncomfortable physical symptoms (including insomnia) when weed is not available.

Needing to have marijuana “to function” is a clear sign of dependence on the substance. Using it several times or more during the day *is* definitely problematic use. Finally, experiencing withdrawal symptoms similar to having the flu strongly indicates dependence on weed. Marijuana is an addictive substance; there is some evidence that demonstrates that people who use the substance regularly become physically and psychologically dependent on it.

It is important to reflect on the social consequences of problematic marijuana use. Have good friends been lost along the way? Have activities that you used to enjoy lost their appeal? When marijuana negatively affects a person’s life or the lives of others, this means that marijuana use is a problem.

### What is the relationship between marijuana use and mental health?

There is strong evidence to suggest that some people should avoid using marijuana altogether, such as people who have experienced psychosis in the past after using marijuana, and those with a genetic predisposition to mental health issues such as schizophrenia. In addition, there is evidence to support that those who use marijuana, especially heavy users and individuals who start to use it at a young age, are at increased risk for developing psychotic disorders.

As noted earlier, some people use marijuana in an attempt to feel better. This is a short-term solution that does not address the core issue. In fact, turning to marijuana when one feels depressed may actually make the symptoms worse. There is some evidence that points to an association between heavy marijuana use and the development of depression.

Using marijuana in place of medications that have been prescribed for medical conditions such as depression or attention deficit disorders is not advisable without consulting a medical professional. Speaking to other adults/health professionals (i.e., counsellors, psychologists and nurses) can also be helpful. Talking about your concerns about current medications and seeking counselling makes sense when it concerns your health.

## Marijuana Questions (Cont'd)

### How does marijuana use affect driving?

Marijuana is an intoxicant. Using the drug affects concentration, hand-eye coordination, alertness, time and distance perception, and delays reaction time. While some people may **think** that they are being more careful when driving a vehicle after recent marijuana use, research findings clearly indicate that there are more motor vehicle accidents following recent marijuana use. Some people claim that marijuana use results in driving more slowly and cautiously – in fact, the drug impairs a driver's ability to respond to an unexpected situation. Furthermore, these accidents lead to potential death and injury.

Despite the recent trend suggesting an increase in the number of young people who drive after recent marijuana use, the best advice is to avoid doing so.

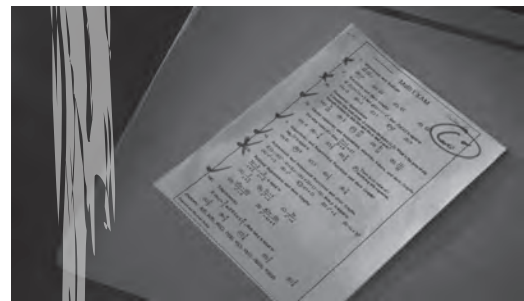
### Are there other health risks linked to marijuana?

Using marijuana is not harm-free. It is impossible to predict your personal risk related to marijuana use. However, based on the research, long-term use may increase the likelihood of developing some types of cancer. Also, marijuana is often smoked in combination with tobacco, which further increases the risk of

cancer. While smoking anything is unhealthy, smoking marijuana is associated with increased risk of respiratory problems: bronchitis, chronic cough and pulmonary infections. Over time, this will have an impact on physical energy and participation in physical activities.

Developing dependence on marijuana is also a health risk. No one plans to become addicted to marijuana.

In Canada, there is growing support for regulated marijuana use among adults. During adolescence, decision making about marijuana use really is a health matter. Just like engaging in regular exercise, eating well, etc., some decisions are simply better.



### Is it beneficial to reduce marijuana use?

Cutting back frequent marijuana use is a good idea. For some people, that is what is required before they're able to stop marijuana use altogether, while others are able to quit "cold turkey." Cutting back on how often one uses marijuana can have a positive impact on school as well as enjoyment of activities outside school.



# Learn About Cannabis (Marijuana)<sup>1</sup>

## What is cannabis?

Cannabis is the scientific name for the hemp plant. Its leaves and flowers—often called marijuana—contain a psychoactive (mind altering) resin that can affect how we feel, think and act. It comes in various forms, including dried leaves and flowers or “buds” (marijuana), pressed resin from flowers and leaves (hashish or hash), and concentrated resin extracted with a solvent (hash oil). While often smoked in a joint or through a pipe or bong (water pipe), cannabis can also be vaporized into a mist. Some people bake or make tea with it, while others turn it into a tincture, a concentrated liquid absorbed by placing a drop under the tongue.

## Why do we use cannabis?

Humans have been using cannabis for a range of reasons since ancient times. Some people have used it when socializing to help them relax and connect with friends. Others have used it for spiritual reasons or simply to experience an altered form of consciousness. And still others have used it to soothe anxiety or manage medical conditions. Cannabis has many benefits but, like any drug, there are risks to using it. Smoking a joint with a friend on a Friday night is one way to relax at the end of a busy work week. But sitting around for hours smoking joint after joint can create a dull atmosphere and make conversation meaningless. It can also increase the risk of making bad decisions such as driving before the effects have completely worn off. And while cannabis may help to relieve stress or anxiety, continuing to use it as a coping strategy may harm our health and relationships.



## What happens when we use cannabis?

When cannabis is inhaled, chemicals called cannabinoids are absorbed through the lungs and into the bloodstream, producing almost immediate effects. When swallowed, cannabinoids are absorbed through the stomach and intestine. This process takes longer, therefore making it more difficult for the user to carefully manage the dose.

The effects of cannabis can be very different for different people. One person may feel relaxed, another full of energy, and another anxious. Sometimes the same person will have a different experience on a different occasion. A lot depends on the type and amount of cannabis we use at a given time. But other factors that affect us include our past experiences with cannabis, present mood and surroundings, and mental and physical health conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> This section was originally developed for Here to Help by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC, and is available from [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca). Used with permission.



## Learn About Cannabis (Marijuana) (Cont'd)

### Health effects

Cannabis can be both beneficial and harmful to our health. For instance, research shows cannabis can help relieve the symptoms of some medical conditions such as pain, nausea and muscle spasms. But heavy use is associated with a variety of harms, including experiencing psychotic symptoms.

Many people who use cannabis socially say it helps them relax and increases their sense of well-being. But some people may feel anxious after using cannabis, affecting their interactions with others. And for a few hours after smoking a joint, a person may have a hard time remembering things, which may have an impact on friendships.

Over time, smoking a lot of cannabis can irritate the respiratory tract, increasing the risk of chronic coughing, shortness of breath and wheezing. Like tobacco smoke, cannabis smoke contains cancer-causing toxins, though the risk of developing some cancers is less for cannabis users, partly because they tend to smoke less than tobacco users.



### When is using cannabis a problem?

Using cannabis is a problem when it negatively affects our life or the lives of others. We may think this refers to people who regularly use large amounts of cannabis, but even using on a single occasion can sometimes lead to a problem. For instance, we may make a poor decision such as driving before the effects have worn off. What's important to recognize is the potential for adverse consequences as well as benefits related to the context of use and over time.

Cannabis use, especially regular use, by young people has particular risks. Like other psychoactive drugs, cannabis can interfere with normal brain development. Early use can also interfere with developing normal patterns of social interaction with peers and have a negative impact on well-being.

The reasons people use cannabis influence their risk of developing problems. For instance, if a person uses cannabis to have fun, only occasional social use may follow. But when a person uses cannabis to cope with a long-term problem such as chronic stress, then more long lasting and intense use may follow.

While most people who use cannabis do not become dependent on the drug, those who use cannabis frequently over a period of time may be putting themselves at some risk. A person who uses frequently may feel they need to use cannabis to feel normal and function during the day.

People who stop using cannabis after regular use may experience mild feelings of withdrawal, including irritability, loss of appetite and difficulty sleeping.

## Mixing cannabis with other substances

It's not uncommon for people to mix cannabis with other substances to experience different feelings or offset unwanted side effects. But there are risks to combining cannabis with other substances, including intensified effects that may last longer than expected or wanted. The following are some common combinations and their related effects.

**Alcohol and other depressants.** These are substances that slow down our heart rate and make us feel more relaxed. Depressants affect coordination and other skills needed for safe driving. Cannabis in combination with even small doses of alcohol impairs our driving ability more than either drug used alone.

**Stimulants.** These are substances such as energy drinks or cocaine that increase our heart rate and make us feel more energetic. Combining cannabis with stimulants may cloud our judgment about how intoxicated we may be, potentially leading to risky behaviours.

**Tobacco.** Tobacco smoke contains many cancer-causing toxins. It is therefore safer to smoke cannabis by itself.



## How to make healthier choices about cannabis

Whenever we choose to use cannabis, it is helpful to know what steps we can take to ensure that our use is the least harmful possible. The following are some useful guidelines to follow.

**Not too much.** Managing how much we use in a given period helps reduce risky behaviours.

**Not too often.** Limiting how often we use helps reduce harms to ourselves and others over time.

**Only in safe contexts.** Making informed decisions about where and with whom we use cannabis helps to minimize harms.

## Is cannabis legal?

Cannabis is a controlled substance in Canada. It is illegal to grow, sell, import, export or use the drug. Under current laws, offenders may receive a fine, a prison term and a criminal record that could affect their future employment, travel plans and educational opportunities. But there are some exceptions for people requiring cannabis for medical reasons. For information on the Marihuana for Medical Purposes Regulations (MMPR), visit the Health Canada website at <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>.

For more information about cannabis use and families, visit the **Cannabis Use and Youth: A Parent's Guide** and **You and Substance Use Workbook** on the *Here to Help* website: [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca). This website also features detailed information on substance use and mental health.