

Cannabis

Debates about whether cannabis should be legalized or not have long been in discussion but the following quote makes a compelling argument: “You only need to see one person whose mind has been altered and life irreparably damaged, or talk to their family, to realize that the headlines are not scaremongering but reflect a daily, and preventable, tragedy”.

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis is obtained from the plant *Cannabis sativa*. Its primary constituent is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, abbreviated as THC but more than 400 other chemicals are present in the plant. The concentration of THC within the plant varies with the section of the plant used and gender of the plant but highest concentration is found around the flowering parts of the female plant. With better artificial means to grow and manipulate crops, so too has the cannabis crop improved. Thus the strength of cannabis has changed drastically over the years. For example in 2005 it was found that the purity of cannabis in Malta has increased from 4.7% to 8.5% which is the highest record since 2001.

Cannabis is generally either smoked or ingested and it is found in three main forms:

- Marijuana or herbal cannabis - this is prepared from the dried flowering tops and leaves
- Hashish or hash – this consists of dried cannabis resin and compressed flowers
- Hash oil or resin – a highly potent and viscous substance obtained by extracting THC from cannabis with an organic solvent.

Most herbal cannabis imported into Europe may originate from West Africa, the Caribbean or South East Asia but resin originates largely from either North Africa or Afghanistan. In Malta, herbal cannabis is generally grown locally whilst resin originates mainly from Morocco.

The Effects of Cannabis

The effect of cannabis varies with the concentration of THC, what form of cannabis is taken and how it is administered. The effects also vary with acute use (immediate, short-term effects of using a drug) and chronic use of a drug (longer-term effects of drug use that may occur if drug use is continued over months or years).

There are various effects of cannabis including:

- Respiratory diseases and risk of lung cancer
- Blackening of teeth and red eyes
- Lowered blood pressure and risk of fainting
- Increased heart rate and heart attack risks
- Infertility
- Increased sensitivity to sensory input and hallucinations
- Disorientation and anxiety
- Decreased memory

- Increased risk of accidents
- Inability to experience pleasure without cannabis
- Increased risk of using other drugs.

Studies about cannabis in Malta

In a study conducted among Maltese students 18-24 year old, it was found that cannabis was the most widely used illicit drug (refer to graph 1) and that the majority of students initiated cannabis use between 16 and 17 years. Another study among 15-16 year old students found that by age 13, 2% had tried cannabis but this doubled by age 15.

Summary of results from studies conducted among young people in Malta			
Survey	Year of last study	Age group	Cannabis use *
Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC)	2001/2	15 year olds	6.5 %
European School Survey Project on alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD)	2003	15-16 year olds	10.4 %
Survey among post-secondary and tertiary level students	2006	18-24 year olds	22.3 %

* Percentages show the rate of respondents who used cannabis at least once in their lifetime.

Maltese police arrest data reveals that in 2005 there were 289 arrestees charged for possession of cannabis and 39 arrestees charged for trafficking of cannabis. These reports also show that between 2003 and 2005, 67% of arrestees aged 12-15 were charged for drug related offences and they consisted of 25 males and 1 female. Of these 12-15 year olds arrested, 22 (85%) were charged for possession of cannabis.

Cannabis and mental health

Research has established that cannabis can aggravate existing mental health problems and recent research indicates that it may also trigger the onset of such problems in some people. Smoking even 1 joint of cannabis increased the risk of developing a psychotic mental disorder, such as schizophrenia in young adulthood by 40% and regular smoking doubled the risk.

A pool of findings in 35 studies from around the world indicates that there is “a consistent association between cannabis use and psychotic symptoms, including disabling psychotic disorders”. Studies cannot prove a simple cause and effect relationship but they found that 1 in 7 cases of conditions such as schizophrenia is caused by cannabis. Research also indicates that cannabis could cause affective disorders such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts but these links are less conclusive. A study which included 5,000 children found that cannabis is more likely to cause external problems such as delinquency and aggression.

Not only does research indicate links between cannabis and mental disorder, true life accounts from actual cannabis users and their acquaintances substantiate the reports:

“Three heavy drug users and their horrific killings”:

- William Jaggs, was a 23-year-old Oxford University student and prolific cannabis user. He was a paranoid schizophrenic who stabbed fashion designer Lucy Braham 66 times at her home and then committed suicide.
- Richard Cazaly was 23 and had a history of heavy drug use dating back at least four years. He is believed to have stabbed pregnant Abigail Witchalls in Surrey, in April 2005 and he killed himself five days after the stabbing.
- Thomas Palmer, then aged 18, butchered two of his friends during a woodland walk after his mind was warped by smoking skunk - a particularly potent form of cannabis. He virtually beheaded 16-year-old Steven Bayliss and repeatedly stabbed Nuttawut Nadauld, 14, near their homes in Wokingham, Berkshire in September 2005.

(Source: Macrae, F., & Andrews, E. (26th July, 2007). *Smoking just one cannabis joint raises danger of mental illness by 40%*. Retrieved 05/08/07 from http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=471106&in_page_id=1770&ct=5)

Quotes from friends and users:

“I have seen my friends who have smoked cannabis in the past, now they are about 35 and they are all depressive and prone to mood swings, even they admit that’s there twisted characters are the result of a wasted youth, cannabis DOES affect the human mind in the long term, my friends, and many old ‘college smokers’ are living evidence, I say to any young people out there don’t kid yourself..you will be different in the future if you choose to smoke cannabis..this is in my opinion a fact”

James Hansworth, Reading UK.

“...I have been a regular smoker of cannabis before, and I have noticed that the more I smoke, the more I noticed small problems with my mental health..”

Nick, West Midlands

(Source: *Is the government right about cannabis?* Retrieved 05/08/07 from http://news.bbc.uk/1/hi/talking_point/3419095.stm.)

The most alarming result of these reports and studies is that trends could be on the rise as the THC concentrations of today continue to increase. We could see increased incidences of mental disorders in the future, due to cannabis use.

Unfortunately data indicates that cannabis use seems to be on the rise in Malta and once the habit is acquired, it can be very difficult to break, as with all addictions. Quitting an addiction is not an event but a process and requires a great deal of courage and support. Understanding why people turn to any drug and recognizing signs of addiction are very important. For more information about cannabis is available and too numerous for one article. If you want to know more or need help with any addiction please seek assistance. Do not be that one person whose mind and life has been altered and irreparably damaged.

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