



# CANNABIS

## A DRUG

SOME FURTHER  
INFORMATION

### Key Terms Related to Cannabis

- While cannabis does not clearly fit into a particular category of drugs, it is generally categorised as a hallucinogen.



- **Cannabis herb**: tobacco-like greenish or brownish material made up of the dried and crumbled flowering tops and leaves of the cannabis plant.



Source: Government Laboratory

- **Cannabis resin or "hash"**: dried black or brown concentrated extract of cannabis flower and plant.



Source: Government Laboratory

- **Cannabis oil or "hash oil"**: cannabis resin in liquid form.



Source: Online photo

- **Cannabinoids**: chemical compounds found in cannabis plants. The following are two more extensively studied cannabinoids:  
(a) THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol): produces the psychoactive effects, such as euphoria, relaxation and heightened sensory experiences ("high"). It is harmful and addictive.

(b) CBD (Cannabidiol): is not psychoactive and does not have abusive potential, and is not a dangerous drug.

- **Synthetic cannabinoids**: substances produced in the laboratory having similar effects to THC or other cannabinoids contained in a cannabis plant. Potency of synthetic cannabinoids has been on the rise, causing more harm.



Source: Online photo

## Adverse Effects of Cannabis Use on Health

- According to the 2018 Annual Report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB)<sup>1</sup>, cannabis produces dependences and has adverse public health consequences including



- Mental illnesses such as psychoses in young persons, especially in those with a personal or family history of such disorder
- Disrupted adolescent development
- Damage the developing brain if taken during adolescence



- Impaired cognitive and educational performance



- Adverse effects on fetal development



- Injuries in motor vehicle crashes

<sup>1</sup> INCB is an independent monitoring body established under the United Nations since 1968 for the implementation of the United Nations international drug control conventions.

# Adverse Effects of Cannabis Use on Health

More details are set out in the tables below

## Short-term adverse effects



- Intoxication, with disturbed consciousness, cognition, perception, affect or behaviour, and psychophysiological functions

- Panic attacks, hallucinations and vomiting (in a minority of first-time users)



- Impairment of driving and an increased risk of road traffic injuries (1.3–2.0-fold)
- Possible triggering of coronary events in younger cannabis smokers



- Adverse effects on the fetus if a mother smokes cannabis during pregnancy

## Long-term psychosocial effects of regular cannabis use

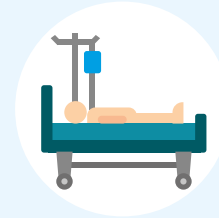


- Dependence (the risk is 1 in 10 among those who have ever used it, 1 in 6 for adolescent users and 1 in 3 for daily users)

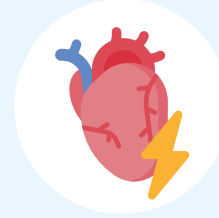


- More severe and persistent negative outcomes among adolescents than among adults
- A dose-response relationship between cannabis use in adolescence and the risk of developing psychotic symptoms or schizophrenia in young adulthood
- Increased risk of early school leaving, cognitive impairment, illicit use of other drugs, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation and behaviour (when cannabis is used daily in adolescence and young adulthood)

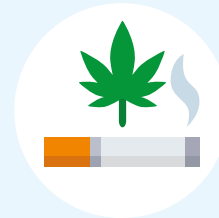
## Other possible longer-term physiological risks of regular cannabis use



- Chronic and acute bronchitis and injury to bronchial lining cells

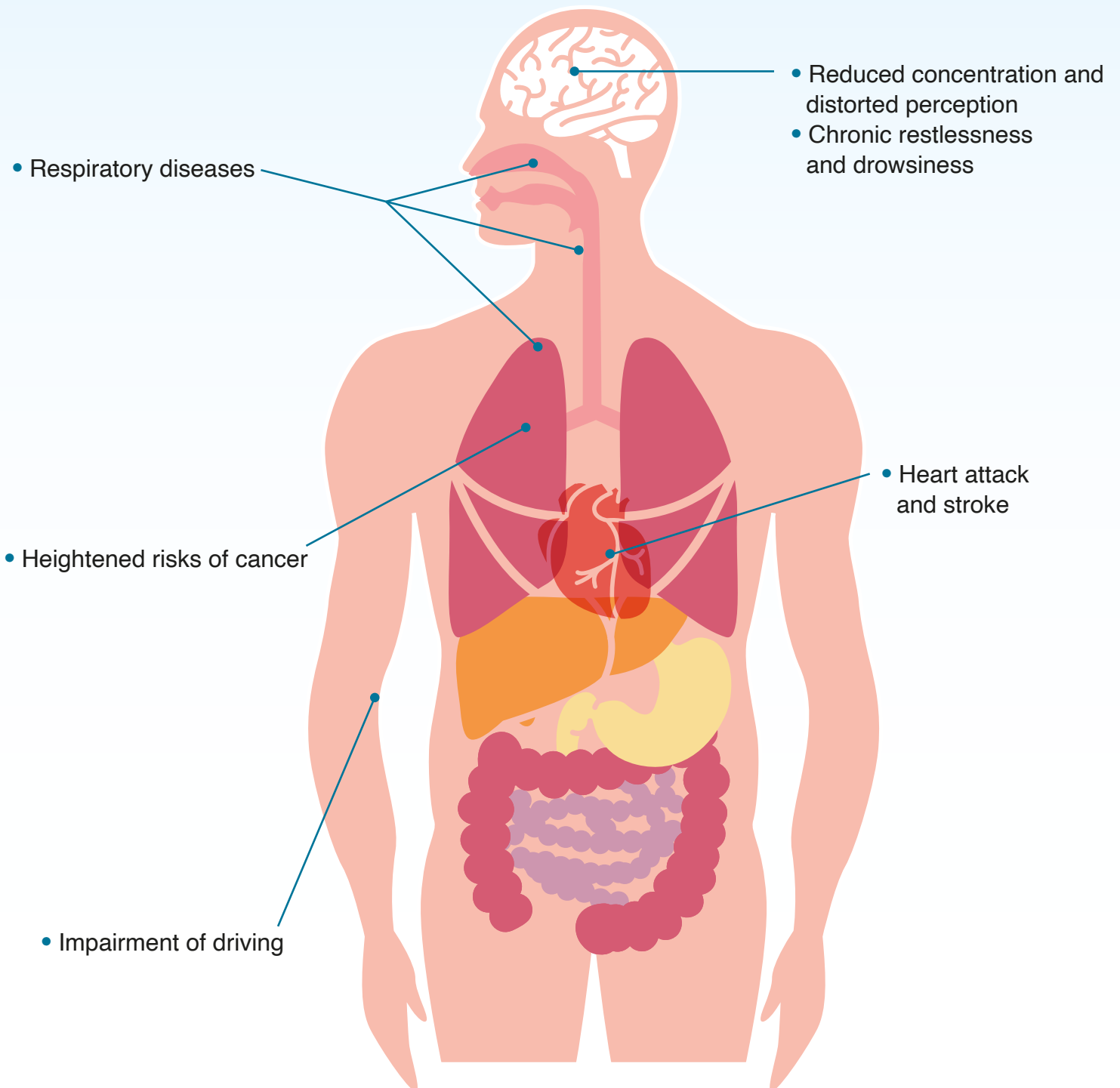


- Myocardial infarctions and strokes in young cannabis users



- An increased risk of cancer and other respiratory diseases if used with tobacco
- Testicular cancer (the link requires further investigation) smokers

## How does cannabis use affect your body?

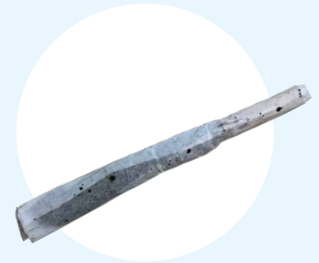


## Medical Use of Cannabis (cannabinoids)

- Some research findings suggest that certain cannabinoids may relieve the symptoms of a few illnesses (e.g. neuropathic pain and spasticity in multiple sclerosis, seizure in a specific type of epilepsy, anti-emetics for cancer patients under chemotherapy).
- It should however be noted that:
  - (a) cannabinoids do **not** modify the underlying disease;
  - (b) cannabinoids are **not** first-line treatment for any of these conditions and neuroprotective effects.
- Also, evaluations of the adverse effects of medicinal cannabinoids have only been short term.



- Smoking cannabis is not a medically acceptable way to obtain standardised doses of cannabinoids because of:
  - (a) difficulty to prescribe specific doses;
  - (b) health risk associated with inhaling carcinogens and toxins in cannabis smoke.



Source: Government Laboratory

- According to the INCB, poorly regulated medical cannabis programmes and the associated lower perception of risk in several countries may have contributed to the legalisation of non-medical cannabis use, i.e. the so-called “recreational use”.

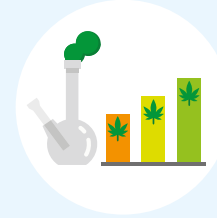


## Withdrawal Symptoms of Cannabis

- Once addicted, the person suffers from an intense psychological craving which makes the person surrender the time and money to cannabis albeit knowing the harm.



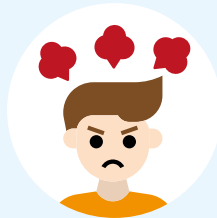
- Tolerance to cannabis develops with time, and the person has to take more and more cannabis to obtain the desired psychological effect.



- Once the cannabis consumption is disrupted or reduced, withdrawal symptoms, such as insomnia, irritability, restlessness and loss of appetite, can appear.



**Insomnia**



**Irritability**



**Restlessness**



**Loss Of Appetite**

## International Control over Cannabis, THC and its derivatives

- The possession, use, distribution, import, export, manufacture and production, etc. of cannabis, THC and its derivatives are regulated under the following three International treaties:
  - (a) the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1964 as amended by the 1972 Protocol;
  - (b) the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances; and
  - (c) the 1988 Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances.

- According to the World Drug Report 2020 published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)<sup>2</sup>, cannabis continues to be the most widely used drug worldwide, with an estimation of about 192 million people abusing cannabis in 2018.



<sup>2</sup> UNODC is a United Nations office established in 1997 (by combining the United Nations International Drug Control Program and the Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Division). Its major functions include implementing the drug programme and crime programme in an integrated manner, addressing the interrelated issues of drug control, crime prevention and international terrorism in the context of sustainable development and human security.

## A Few Overseas Jurisdictions Legalising “Recreational Cannabis”

- “Recreational cannabis” is not a clearly defined term. It generally refers to the non-medical use of cannabis by individuals in the belief that occasional use is not addictive.



- As at end 2020, only Canada and Uruguay have legalised “recreational cannabis” for sale on a national level. In the United States, “recreational cannabis” are legal in certain states but remains illegal at the federal government level.



- Some reasons given by overseas jurisdictions when legalising the use of “recreational cannabis” are:

Reasons given by some jurisdictions	Observations
Restrict young people’s access to cannabis	INCB points out that experience in jurisdictions raises serious doubts about this claim. There are substantial numbers of licensed cannabis business operation selling cannabis to young people, and only face an offence punishable by a small fine.
Prevent organised crime groups from generating profits from cannabis and displace illegal cannabis activities with licit production	UNODC in its World Drug Report 2019 states unequivocally that in reality, thriving illicit cannabis markets still exist in many of the jurisdictions that have legalised “recreational cannabis” for quite some time already. World Drug Report 2020 also indicates that in 2019, around 40% of cannabis users in Canada were still getting their product from illegal sources.
Generate tax revenue from legalised cannabis for funding government initiatives like public health programmes	UNODC adds that with the market for non-medical use of cannabis expanding rapidly, profits generated by cannabis sale are more likely to dictate and control the course of the cannabis industry than are public health considerations.
Alleviate the court’s workload arising from cannabis offences	We do not consider this a valid consideration in Hong Kong’s context. The harm of cannabis abuse far outweighs any benefits of reduced court’s workload.

## A Few Overseas Jurisdictions Legalising “Recreational Cannabis”

- Some argue that alcohol and tobacco, despite the harm inflicted on those addicted to them, are also legalised. “Recreational cannabis” which is perceived to be less harmful compared to other drugs, should therefore be legalised.



- There are **serious flaws** to this argument.



- First, the legal use of tobacco and alcohol has its historical background. There is already undisputed evidence on their harmful effects. For example, tobacco kills people prematurely. On average, tobacco users lose 15 years of life and 12% of all adult death worldwide results from the smoking habit. We must ask ourselves: why should we allow a harmful substance if we can stop it?

- Second, cannabis is not less harmful. Indeed, UNODC has pointed out that cannabis products have diversified and increased in potency in recent years.



- Third, the experience with alcohol and tobacco suggests that legalisation of “recreational cannabis” will:
  - (a) reduce the perceived risks of using cannabis and social disapproval of adult cannabis use;
  - (b) increase the diversion of cannabis to persons who are under the minimum legal age to purchase and use it;
  - (c) increase cannabis use by making cannabis more widely available, including at a lower price and in more potent forms; and
  - (d) likely to increase the number of new users among adolescents and young adults.

- Fourth, the legalisation of non-medical cannabis use in some jurisdictions makes it more difficult to enforce international drug control treaty provisions especially in terms of drug trafficking. INCB has called upon the Government of countries in which the use of cannabis for non-medical purposes has been permitted to take steps to compile with the legal obligations under international drug control conventions.





## Hong Kong's Position

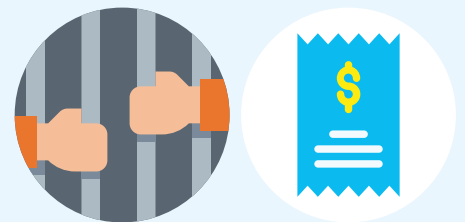
- Cannabis, THC or its derivatives and products containing these substances in whatever form (including food, drinks or topical products for skin, hair and nail, etc.) are controlled dangerous drugs in Hong Kong under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance, Cap 134.
  - Although CBD is not psychoactive and hence not a controlled drug under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance, CBD products may contain a low level of THC. Products containing THC **at any concentration** are regarded as dangerous drugs and are controlled.
  - Any pharmaceutical product containing CBD is classified as Part 1 poison and prescription medicine under the Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance, Cap. 138, and subject to the control under relevant requirements.
- Do not bring cannabis and cannabis products in Hong Kong or use them illicitly.



Source: Customs and Excise Department

Hong Kong Customs seized about 70 kilograms of suspected cannabis buds with an estimated market value of about \$12 million at Hong Kong International Airport on January 17, 2020.

- There are severe penalties for trafficking and illicit possession/ consumption:
  - (a) **Life imprisonment** and **\$5 million** fine for trafficking dangerous drugs; and
  - (b) **7-year imprisonment** and **\$1 million** fine for illegal possession or consumption



- Given that cannabis is a drug and the United Nations requires strict control on the production, manufacture, export, import, use and possession, etc. of cannabis and its derivatives, Hong Kong will **not** legalise the use of the so-called “recreational cannabis” – this is for the protection of health and benefits of Hong Kong people, in particular our younger generation.

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