

Cannabis: What Educators Need to Know

This Info-Sheet helps educators to have informed conversations with students about recreational cannabis.

How can educators approach the topic of cannabis with students?

The legalization of recreational cannabis for adults who are 19 or older gives educators an opportunity to promote critical thinking around substance use. It also encourages students to engage in personal decision-making, now and in the future, that will help them to achieve their short- and long-term goals. While it is illegal for Ontario youth under the age of 19 to use, buy, possess, cultivate or share recreational cannabis, legalization for adults may prompt students to think more about this issue and come forward with questions.

To have a meaningful conversation with students, approach the topic of cannabis in a knowledgeable, supportive and non-judgmental way,¹ and in the context of a positive educator-student relationship. Take time to reflect on when you were younger and what information you needed at that point in your life.¹ Tailor the conversation to the students' knowledge needs and provide appropriate information by considering:

- the reasons why students use cannabis;
- risks of cannabis use;
- the student's age and level of development;
- the school/community/family context.

Like other substances, most students will not use cannabis,² some will use it recreationally without developing problems, and a subset may develop problems as a result of their use.

In your conversation, recognize the differences between the use of cannabis for recreational and for medical purposes, which requires medical authorization under federal law.

Be aware of common myths that can influence students, such as the belief that trying cannabis is not harmful. The references and links provided at the end of this Info-Sheet offer more detailed information to assist with knowledge-building in this area.

Health promotion, prevention and harm reduction approaches can be considered when talking with students about cannabis or other drugs. Health promotion and prevention approaches aim to promote well-being, reduce the number of students who will start using cannabis, delay initiation, and reduce the frequency of use.³ Harm reduction approaches aim to decrease the harms and risks associated with cannabis use.⁴ Harm reduction strategies have become increasingly accepted as a pragmatic and effective approach for individuals who may be at greater risk of using cannabis or are already using drugs.⁴ Providing evidence-based information about harms and risks associated with cannabis can help potential users to make informed decisions about trying this drug and about precautions they can take to minimize risks.¹

Your local public health unit is a resource for information about health promotion, prevention and harm reduction approaches.



What is cannabis?

Cannabis (also called marijuana, weed, dope and pot) is a drug that comes from the cannabis plant. It consists of dried flowers and leaves that are greenish or brownish in colour. It can be used for medical purposes, which requires medical authorization under federal law. Different ways to use cannabis include, but are not limited to:⁵

- Smoked as a cigarette, often called a joint, spliff, blunt, or in a pipe or bong.
- Vaporized (sometimes called vaping) through an e-cigarette or vapor products.
- Mixed in a drink or with food (such as tea, brownies, and candies), called edibles.
- Consumed as a tincture (concentrated liquid) 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 also known as hashish.

Because cannabis is a psychoactive substance, there are risks associated with using, regardless of how it is consumed. Some ways of using cannabis are more harmful than others (e.g., smoking can lead to lung damage).⁶ While consuming edibles may reduce some of the health risks known with smoking, it is important to convey to students that they are still harmful.⁶

What are edibles?

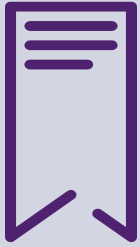
Food or drinks that contain cannabis are termed “edibles.” Edibles can come in forms that look like food or candy and that may be appealing to children and youth.⁸ This means that they could be unintentionally consumed by children, youth and/or pets, and thus should be clearly labelled and stored out of their reach in a safe and secure location.^{8,9}

The cannabis from edibles is absorbed through the digestive track and the liver, a process that is slower than inhalation but results in a stronger intoxication.^{10,11} The effects of edibles may be felt between 30 minutes and two hours after ingestion and may lead to powerful, full-body effects that can last 12 hours with residual effects lasting 24 hours.^{7,8,10} The level and duration of intoxication depends on whether the person consumed other food, their experience with cannabis use, how the cannabis was prepared, its potency, co-use with other substances (e.g., alcohol) and other factors such as body size.

Because cannabis edibles do not harm the lungs and respiratory system, they are potentially less harmful than cannabis that is inhaled through smoking or vaping.⁷ However, edibles can still be harmful to your health. For example, the delayed effect can cause a person to consume larger amounts than they intended in a short amount of time.⁶ This can increase the risk of cannabis adverse events, delusion or paranoia.¹² See page 5 for more risks of youth using cannabis.

Health Canada regulations require that cannabis edible, extract and topical products are sold in child-resistant packaging and in plain packages that are less appealing to youth.¹³





In 2019, approximately one in five (22%) grade 7–12 students in Ontario said they used cannabis at least once in the previous year.² There was no significant increase from the number of students that reported using cannabis in 2017.² Most students reported that they used a joint, bong or edibles. Only 1% of students in grade 7 and 5% of students in grade 8 reported using cannabis. Use increases with grade and was highest in grade 12 (40%).² It's important to remember that 78% of students in grades 7 to 12 reported that they have not used cannabis at all in the past year.²

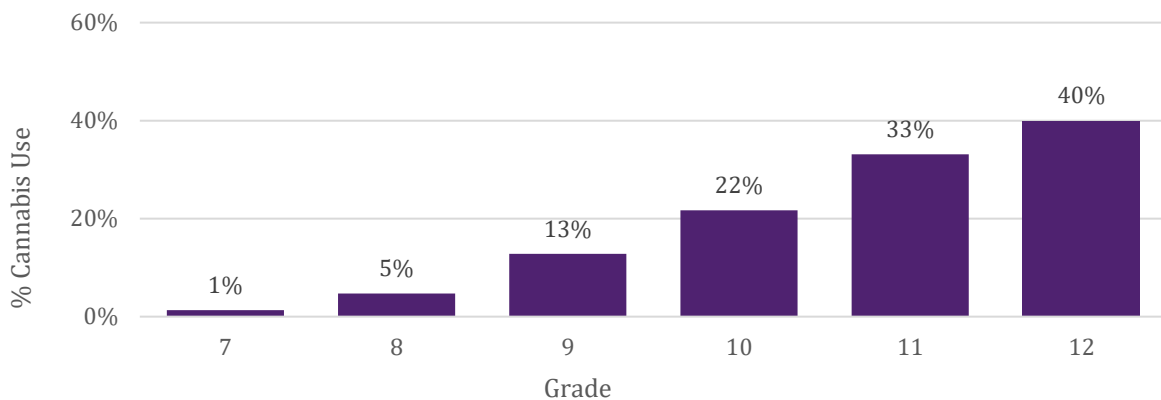


Figure 1. Self-reported cannabis use by Ontario students, grades 7–12 in 2019

What is the impact of cannabis on emotions, cognition and perception?

Cannabis contains THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), a chemical that causes a range of mental and physical effects (also known as a “high”).⁵ Cannabis can make some people feel relaxed and happy, but it can also cause confusion, drowsiness, forgetfulness, panic, delusions and distorted perceptions.¹⁴ Studies show that the average potency of THC in cannabis today is almost 10% higher than it was 30 years ago.¹⁵

When cannabis is smoked or vaporized, the effects begin right away and can last six hours or longer.¹⁴ The effects of edibles may begin between 30 minutes and two hours after ingestion, and can last 12 hours or longer, with residual effects lasting 24 hours.^{7, 8, 10} The delayed effect of edibles can cause a person to consume larger amounts than they intended in a short amount of time.⁶ Consuming large amounts of cannabis is not life threatening, unlike other substances, such as alcohol, opioids and/or other drugs that can lead to fatal overdoses.¹⁶ However, consumption of large amounts of cannabis can have adverse effects such as increased risk of nausea or vomiting, paranoia, delusion or psychotic episodes.^{6, 12, 14, 30}





Key Cannabis Facts

- The law in Ontario for recreational cannabis: It is illegal for youth under the age of 19 to use, buy, possess, cultivate or share recreational cannabis, including cannabis edibles, extracts and topicals. Smoking and vaping cannabis is prohibited in places where smoking tobacco or using e-cigarettes is prohibited. It cannot be smoked or vaped at school, on school grounds, on children's playgrounds and all public areas within 20 metres of these grounds, or consumed in any way in motor vehicles, motorized snow vehicles and boats, subject to certain exemptions.¹⁷
- Recreational cannabis was not legalized because it is harmless.¹⁸ The federal government legalized recreational cannabis to create strict rules for producing, distributing, selling and possessing cannabis across Canada. The legalization aims to keep cannabis out of the hands of youth and protect public health and safety by allowing adults to access cannabis legally.¹⁹
- Most students do not use cannabis. The majority also reported that they did not plan to use cannabis when it became legal for adults.²
- Cannabis is a psychoactive drug, so it can affect memory, concentration, mental health and physical well-being. Cannabis use can harm young people's health and the development of their brain.¹⁴ This is important for youth, since the human brain is not fully developed until the age of 25.⁵ Cannabis smoke contains levels of chemicals that are similar to tobacco smoke, which can increase the risk of cancer and lung disease.²⁰
- Cannabis can be addictive. About one in six teens (aged 12–17 years old) who start using cannabis will develop an addiction.^{21, 22} Those addicted can experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop, which can include difficulty sleeping, depressed mood and increased anxiety.^{1, 23}



What are the risks for youth of using cannabis?

Trying cannabis is unlikely to cause serious problems in most people, but sometimes even occasional use can be harmful. Youth who use cannabis at a young age, often and over the long-term (for months or years), are at risk of long-term health and social problems.^{5, 14, 15}

For example:

- **Harm to the brain**, such as problems with memory, concentration, thinking, learning, handling emotions and decision-making.^{14, 15} Research shows that cannabis use can affect normal brain functioning in youth and young adults up to age 25, and may alter brain development.¹⁵
- **Problems with academic progress**, such as impact on learning and attention, difficulty with completing school work, lower school performance and increased risk of dropping out of high school.¹⁵
- **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.^{5, 14, 15}
- **Difficulties with relationships**, such as conflicts at home, school, or work.¹⁴
- **Physical health harms**, such as lung and respiratory problems from smoking cannabis.¹⁴
- **Addiction**, such as difficulty controlling how much or how often the person uses it, even when it's causing them challenges in their life.²⁴ Cannabis can be especially addictive for youth.¹⁵

What are the signs that a student may have a problem with cannabis or other substances?

Like other substances, most youth will not use cannabis, some will use it recreationally without long-term problems, and others may develop problems due to sustained use over time.² In 2019, 3.4% of students in grade 9 to 12 reported symptoms of cannabis dependence.² It is sometimes hard to detect, but changes in behavior can signal there may be a problem with cannabis use. For example: ^{5, 25, 26}

- Ignoring responsibilities at work, school or home.
- Giving up activities that they used to find important or enjoyable.
- Changes in mood (e.g., feeling irritable and paranoid).
- Changing friends.
- Having difficulties with family members, friends and peers.
- Being secretive or dishonest.
- Changing sleep habits, appetite or other behaviors.
- Borrowing money or having more money than usual.
- If using cannabis, using more or more frequently.
- Feeling unable to cut down or control cannabis use.



How can I promote student well-being and prevent harms related to cannabis?

Consider the following suggestions when speaking with students about cannabis as well as other substances, like alcohol:



Encourage students to avoid or delay using cannabis. Reinforce to students that cannabis use carries health, mental health and cognitive risks, particularly for people under age 25. The best way to prevent harm when it comes to cannabis is to not use it at all.⁶ Remind students that it is illegal for youth under the age of 19 to use, buy, possess, cultivate or share recreational cannabis.



Provide students with opportunities to learn about cannabis legalization. The topic can be explored through assignments, classroom debates, discussion of current events and/or school-wide projects.



Suggest that students talk to a trusted adult. Help students identify trusted people (e.g., a parent/guardian, family member, teacher, school staff member, faith/cultural leader, physician or nurse) and community resources that can assist with understanding the facts about cannabis, how to reduce harms, how to make informed decisions and how to respond to peer pressure.⁵ Students can be reminded that they have many adult allies who can support their decision-making.



Encourage students to build positive friendships as well as community and school connections. Healthy relationships with parents and peers can help protect students from substance use problems.²⁷ Seek out ways to help students build positive relationships with peers, teachers or others within their communities.



Help students explore ways to manage stress and feelings without cannabis. Some young people use cannabis to help them deal with boredom, stress, sadness or depression.¹ Help students find other ways to feel good or to help them manage feelings, like talking to a person they trust, seeking mental health and addiction supports, and engaging in clubs, sports, hobbies or other activities.^{1, 5}



Remind students that they have a choice if others pressure them to use cannabis. Feeling social pressure from friends or others to use cannabis can be challenging, but it is important for students to know that most students do not use cannabis. Almost four out of five Ontario students in Grades 7 to 12 have not used cannabis in the past year.²



Remind students to never ride with a driver who is under the influence of cannabis or any other substance. Driving after using cannabis doubles the chances of having a motor vehicle collision.²⁸



How can I talk to older students?

In addition to the messages above, consider the following suggestions for older students or those who are at higher risk of using cannabis:

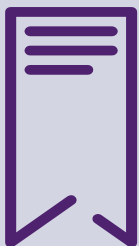
- **Remind students that driving under the influence of cannabis is dangerous and illegal.** It is critical to emphasize to students that to stay safe, they should never drive under the influence of cannabis. Impairment from cannabis can last at least six hours,²⁹ but could be longer, more than 24 hours, depending on the person and the product used.³⁰ Using cannabis and alcohol together further increases impairment.³⁰ In Ontario, there is zero tolerance for young and new drivers; that is, they are not allowed to have any cannabis in their system if driving a motor vehicle.
- **Encourage students to avoid mixing or using cannabis with alcohol, tobacco or other substances.** Mixing drugs can make their effects unpredictable, increase the level of impairment¹⁴ and cause negative side effects.⁶
- **Encourage students to limit the amount of cannabis they use at one time and reduce how often they use it.** Frequent cannabis use is linked to higher risk of physical health and mental health problems⁶ and can have a negative impact on relationships.
- **Guide students and their families to specialized support if their cannabis usage is frequent and/or problematic.** There are addiction specialists in many communities who can help, such as mental health and addiction nurses who are focused on working with students with mental health or addiction issues.



Where educators and parents can find more help and information

- Information on the legalization of recreational cannabis in Ontario: www.ontario.ca/cannabis
- Health Canada public education resources that can help guide discussions about cannabis: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/resources.html>
- The Cannabis Knowledge Exchange Hub provides credible cannabis information for educators and other professionals: www.camh.ca/cannabisknowledgehub
- Educator resources:
 - Ministry of Education's web page: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/healthyschools/educators-resources.html
 - Information and guidance related to substance misuse: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/SupportingMinds.pdf
 - Cannabis Education Resources: www.teachingtools.ophea.net/supplements/cannabis-education-resources/cannabis-resources
 - Information on school based responses for youth using cannabis: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/healthyschools/cannabis-fact-sheet-en.pdf>
- Parent resources:
 - Ministry of Education's web page: www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/healthyschools/parents-resources.html
 - School Mental Health Ontario web page: www.smh-assist.ca/blog/cannabis-info-sheet/
 - Fact and fiction about cannabis: www.ccsa.ca/help-your-teen-understand-whats-fact-and-fiction-about-marijuana-infographic
 - Cannabis talk kit, know how to talk with your teen: www.drugfreekidscanada.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/34-17-1850-Cannabis-Talk-Kit-EN-10.pdf
- Resources on how to talk to youth about drugs:
 - Talking pot with youth, a cannabis communication guide for youth allies: www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/CCSA-Cannabis-Communication-Guide-2018-en.pdf
 - Talking with teenagers about drugs: www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-abuse/talking-about-drugs/talking-with-teenagers-about-drugs.html
 - Talking with youth: <https://responsibilitygrowshere.com/marijuana-talking-tips-for-adults/>
- Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines:
 - Youth resource: www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/lrcug-for-youth
 - Evidence-based recommendations for lowering the risks of cannabis use: www.camh.ca/-/media/files/pdfs---reports-and-books---research/canadas-lower-risk-guidelines-cannabis-pdf.pdf
- Data on substance use among students in Ontario: www.camh.ca/osduhs

Resources for students



If a student needs help with cannabis use or dealing with feelings like sadness or stress, the first step is to encourage them to talk to someone they trust. Offer to talk with them, or recommend they talk to another trusted adult, such as a parent/guardian/caregiver, school staff member (e.g., coach, principal, guidance counsellor), a school mental health professional (e.g., school social worker), physician, faith/cultural leader, or mental health and addiction nurse. If they're not ready to talk to someone they know, they can talk or chat online anonymously, 24/7, with a counsellor at Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca)

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