



Cannabis and HIV/AIDS:

6. A Few Tips for Safer Use and Better Health

Included in this series of fact sheets on Cannabis and HIV/AIDS:

1. The Medicinal Use of Cannabis
2. How to Apply to Use Medicinal Cannabis Legally
3. How to Speak to your Doctor about Medicinal Cannabis
4. Information Sheet for Physicians
5. Where to Find Cannabis for Medicinal Purposes
6. A Few Tips for Safer Use and Better Health
7. Cooking with Cannabis
8. Tips for Growing Cannabis Safely
9. How to Deal with the Stigma and Discrimination of Cannabis Use

Contact Information:

These fact sheets have been prepared by the Canadian AIDS Society, in consultation with a National Steering Committee and a Legal Consultant. They are easily photocopied. We encourage you to distribute them widely.

For updates on these fact sheets, or for more information, please visit our web site at <www.cdnaids.ca/cannabis> or contact us at:

Canadian AIDS Society
190 O'Connor Street, Suite 800
Ottawa ON, Canada, K2P 2R3

Tel: 1-613-230-3580
Toll free: 1-800-499-1986



Harm Reduction Approaches to Smoking

There are a few things you can do to reduce, minimize or even eliminate the health risks associated with smoking:

- **Try a few puffs.** When smoked, the effects of cannabis are very quick, making it easy to adjust your dose as needed. Try a puff or two and wait a few minutes to see if you have achieved the desired effect. You can then decide whether you need another puff or two. Concentrate on being present and aware. Notice the effects on your symptoms. It is a good idea to develop this awareness, as cannabis varies a lot in potency and effect.
- **Don't hold the smoke in** for more than a few seconds. Research has shown that holding the smoke in for a prolonged period does not increase the absorption of the cannabinoids.
- **Get a "cigarette snuffer"** from any store that sells cannabis paraphernalia. You can place it in your ashtray and easily put out your joint and save it for later. They cost a few dollars at most. This can prevent wasting cannabis while your joint is burning and avoids having to crush the end of your joint in order to put it out.
- **Use a pipe.** Pipes can really help you make efficient use of the cannabis you have. Less cannabis is wasted with unnecessary burning. Pipes also make it easy to have a few puffs at a time, plus you don't get the smoke by-products of burning paper.
- **Don't mix with tobacco.** Unlike cannabis, there is a significant amount of evidence that shows a strong link between smoking tobacco and lung cancer, among other negative health effects. It is highly recommended NOT to mix cannabis with tobacco. Some claim that a joint may burn better when mixed with tobacco. A joint rolled without tobacco can also burn very nicely, and even if it goes out, just light it up again!
- **About bongs and water pipes.** Many people find the smoke smoother, cooler and less irritating when they use a water pipe. Water pipes can also reduce tars and other toxins in cannabis smoke. However, these devices also filter out some cannabinoids, which means that you will probably need to smoke more to get the effect you seek. Remember to change the water after each use to avoid the growth of contaminants which may affect your health.
- **Use a vaporizer:** Vaporizers are gaining popularity. They are devices that heat the cannabis just below the point of burning. The cannabinoids are released as vapours,

without the harmful by-products of smoke. The price of vaporizers varies. They can be expensive. There are two main kinds: active air vaporizers and flat plate vaporizers. The active air ones are recommended. Vaporizers are sold in most places that sell cannabis paraphernalia. Some stores will give discounts to medicinal cannabis users. Shop around, talk to others who have used them. Try before you buy. Some cannabis clubs or compassion clubs, if there is one near you, may have vaporizers for you to try. Check out some web sites on vaporizers. Here is a useful one: <www.canorml.org/healthfacts/vaporizers.html>.

- **Cook with cannabis:** Cooking with cannabis is a great way to reduce or eliminate smoking altogether. However, eating cannabis is quite different from smoking it. Please refer to the fact sheet on “Cooking with Cannabis” for more information.

- **Other alternatives to smoking.** Some cannabis clubs and some “private entrepreneurs” offer other cannabis products such as tinctures, oral sprays, edible oils, concentrates (hashish, oils, “budder”) and baked goods. Keep in mind that the sale of these products is not legal in Canada and that there is no quality control of these products. **The Authorization to Possess does not apply to any derivatives of cannabis such as hashish, hash oil or budder.**

- **Pharmaceutical alternatives:** There are a few products on the market that are either extracted from the cannabis plant (Sativex®) or are synthesized, such as Marinol® (dronabinol) and Cesamet® (nabilone). Your doctor can provide you with information and prescribe these products to you. Some people use these alternatives exclusively, while others like to complement their cannabis use with these pharmaceuticals.

Tips for First Time Users

Many of you will have used cannabis socially before you used it medicinally. If you have NEVER used cannabis before, here are some things to consider before you do:

- **Speak to others who are experienced with cannabis** to have an idea of what to expect. Most people find the psychoactive effect of cannabis pleasant. However it does take some getting used to.
- **Set up a safe environment, with a coach** when you are ready to try cannabis for the first time. Be in a safe and familiar environment with someone you trust who can walk you through it and stay with you as you experience it.
- **Start slowly if you smoke it.** Try a puff or two and see how it goes. The psychoactive effect can be subtle. You may not “think” you are feeling anything. Concentrate on being present and aware. Notice changes in the way you feel or behave. Notice the effects on your symptoms. It

is a good idea to develop this awareness, as cannabis varies in potency and effect. This awareness will be very useful as you learn to use cannabis for your symptoms.

- **If you experience anxiety or paranoia, stay calm.** Seek out someone you trust. Remember that cannabis will not kill you. Coaches should reassure the person that they are OK and that this too shall pass. The unpleasant feelings should disappear within about an hour. Eating or drinking something sweet may also help.
- **Cannabis is not for everyone.** Only you can determine whether using cannabis to help manage your symptoms is appropriate for you.

Tips for Using Cannabis Safely and Responsibly

- **Use cannabis as part of a healthy, balanced and responsible lifestyle.** Learn to use cannabis to manage your symptoms and take care of yourself. There are other great ways to reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and to relax, such as exercise, yoga, meditation, socializing, and others. Find what works for you.
- **Not all cannabis is created equal.** Be aware that the difference between different kinds of cannabis may be great. Some cannabis strains are stronger than others. It is a good habit to try a few puffs of a new batch and wait a few minutes to assess the effect.
- **You may develop a tolerance** to a specific strain over time, which means you may no longer feel the medicinal effects. You can minimize this by using a variety of strains of cannabis. Taking a break from cannabis use altogether will also help reduce the tolerance.
- **Never EVER smoke mouldy weed!** Some moulds, bacteria or other contaminants can grow on your cannabis, whether it is stored or still growing, depending on the conditions. If you spot some black, white, greyish or translucent fuzzy growths on your stash, throw it out, just like you would mouldy food. Some moulds can produce highly toxic substances that can cause serious lung infections. Better to be safe than to be very sick!
- **Store your cannabis safely.** Ensure that the cannabis is properly dried before storing it. Store it in a wood, hard plastic or metal container, in a cool and dark place. There should not be any condensation on the inside of your container. If there is, dry out the cannabis in a paper bag for another day or two before storing it, just to make sure. You can refrigerate or freeze cannabis in a sealed container to slow down its deterioration. For long-term storage, place the cannabis in a Mason jar, a sealed glass jar, or a vacuum-sealed bag or container in the freezer.
- **Be informed.** Find out what you can about the medicinal use of cannabis, the health effects of cannabis, and the legal issues associated with its use. Look for “Useful Resources” in these fact sheets.
- **Be a good ambassador.** Your use affects the perception that others will have of all people who use cannabis medicinally. Teach by example.
- **Avoid using cannabis when driving.** Remember, it is not just your life at stake but the life of others. It is illegal to drive impaired. Plan ahead.
- **Cannabis may not be conducive to school or work.** Depending on your medicinal needs, you may want to examine where it is and is not appropriate to use cannabis. Some people find it difficult to function at school or work when they use cannabis. These places may not be favourable to your use of cannabis and it may cause some problems for you. Some places, however, are quite accepting of cannabis use for medicinal purposes. Use your judgment.
- **Be aware** that cannabis tends to increase the effects of alcohol.
- **Use of cannabis by minors should not be encouraged,** unless it is advised for medicinal purposes by a health care professional.
- **Cannabis use should contribute to your health, well-being, creativity, work, relationships and social obligations.** It is a good idea to assess your use of cannabis on a regular basis to determine if it is still a positive contribution to your life. Please refer to the “Self-Assessment Questions” in this document.
- **Be kind, discreet and polite.** Be a good neighbour. Respect local smoking by-laws. Respect others around you. Be conscious that the smell of cannabis can attract unwanted attention from police or others around you. This is especially important if you are growing cannabis, or know others that are.

Cannabis Use Self-Assessment Questions:

Cannabis use should contribute to your health, well-being, creativity, work, relationships and social obligations. It is a good idea to assess your use of cannabis on a regular basis to determine if it is still a positive contribution to your life. Here are some questions to guide your reflection:

- Is cannabis helping you manage some symptoms such as appetite loss, nausea and vomiting, pain, stress, anxiety or others?
- Is the amount of cannabis you use increasing? Some people keep a log of their cannabis use to monitor whether or not their use pattern changes. You can keep track of how much you use, how often, in what situation and how much money you spend to assess your use.
- Are you happy with your cannabis use or would you like to make some changes?
- Do you feel that your cannabis use is having a negative impact on your everyday life? On your relationships with your friends and family? On your job or work? On your financial situation?
- Are you having difficulties managing your everyday life? Do you feel that cannabis is contributing to that problem?

It is important for you to determine the place and role that cannabis takes in your everyday life. If you feel that cannabis is no longer a positive contribution to your life and health care, you may want to seek some help. Speak with your local AIDS service organization. They may be able to refer you to some substance use counselling. Contact a local counsellor or therapist. Take care of yourself!



Production of this document has been made possible through a financial contribution from the **Public Health Agency of Canada**. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Public Health Agency of Canada, nor those of Health Canada. The Canadian AIDS Society thanks **Solvay Pharma** for their contribution to this project.

Solvay
Pharma

