

Cannabis Misuse

Understanding the risks, the signs and where to get help

Cannabis can affect people very differently. Some people experience relaxation or temporary relief from difficult thoughts; others experience anxiety, panic, confusion or paranoia. Risk is influenced by frequency, potency, age, individual vulnerability, other substances and the reason cannabis is being used. A pattern can become problematic when cannabis starts shaping mood, motivation, relationships, money, sleep or everyday functioning.

Short-term relief can carry longer-term costs

Cannabis may feel as though it slows thoughts, reduces distress, helps sleep or makes boredom easier to tolerate. But repeated use can also become tied to avoiding emotions, social situations or ordinary discomfort. When the brain begins to expect cannabis before relaxing, eating, sleeping, socialising or coping, the person's world can gradually become smaller even when use still feels helpful in the moment.

Signs the pattern may be becoming harmful

Thinking & memory Reduced attention, forgetfulness, difficulty following conversations or completing tasks, especially during or after use.	Mood & perception Anxiety, panic, suspiciousness, paranoia, altered perception or feeling detached and overwhelmed.
Motivation & routine Increasing avoidance, missed responsibilities, reduced interest in previously important activities or organising the day around use.	Dependence Cravings, using more than intended, repeated unsuccessful attempts to cut down, or continuing despite clear problems.

Dependence and withdrawal

Regular cannabis use can lead to dependence. When someone reduces or stops after frequent use, withdrawal can include irritability, restlessness, sleep disturbance or vivid dreams, reduced appetite, low mood, anxiety and strong urges to use. Symptoms are usually not medically dangerous in the way alcohol or benzodiazepine withdrawal can be, but they can be uncomfortable and can pull someone back into the cycle. Professional support can help when repeated attempts to change have not lasted.

Mental-health warning signs

Seek urgent professional help if cannabis use is followed by severe paranoia, hallucinations, marked confusion, a dramatic change in behaviour, or symptoms suggesting the person is losing touch with reality. Call 999 if there is immediate danger, serious medical illness, collapse, or risk of harm to self or others. Persistent symptoms after intoxication has worn off deserve assessment rather than being dismissed as 'just cannabis'.

Young people and the developing brain

Adolescence and early adulthood are periods of continuing brain development. Frequent cannabis use at younger ages is associated with greater concern around cognition, education, dependence and mental health. The relationship is complex and not every young person who uses cannabis will experience the same outcomes, but early, frequent and high-potency use warrants particular attention. Conversations work better when they combine clear boundaries and accurate information with curiosity about why the young person is using.

Driving and everyday safety

Cannabis can impair reaction time, attention, coordination and judgement. Do not drive while impaired. UK drug-driving law also sets legal limits for specified drugs, including THC. Combining cannabis with alcohol or other substances can further affect judgement and safety. Work involving vehicles, machinery, heights or responsibility for vulnerable people also deserves careful consideration.

A first reflection

Ask: **What does cannabis give me today?** Then ask: **What might it be costing me tomorrow?** Consider sleep, anxiety, memory, motivation, relationships, money and the ability to tolerate ordinary emotions. This is not about forcing a negative answer; it is about seeing the whole picture rather than only the immediate effect.

Cannabis Misuse - Support and Recovery

Practical change, withdrawal support and UK routes to help

Where to get help in the UK

GP	A GP can discuss anxiety, sleep, mood, memory or other health concerns and help identify appropriate substance-misuse or mental-health support.
Local drug & alcohol service	Community services can assess cannabis use, dependence and wider needs. Many accept self-referrals and offer individual, group and recovery support.
FRANK	Confidential UK drug information and advice. Helpline: 0300 123 6600 ; text 82111 . FRANK also provides information about finding local services.
UK SMART Recovery	Free peer-support meetings using practical tools for motivation, urges, problem-solving and maintaining behaviour change.
Narcotics Anonymous UK	Peer-led recovery fellowship with in-person and online meetings. Helpline: 0300 999 1212 .
Urgent help	Use NHS 111 for urgent medical advice where available. Call 999 for immediate danger, collapse, serious illness or severe mental-health crisis.

Changing the pattern

Start by mapping when cannabis appears in the day. Is it linked with waking, finishing work, eating, socialising, anxiety, sensory overload or sleep? Identify the strongest cue and plan one alternative response before trying to change everything at once. Recovery may include psychological support, peer recovery, sleep work, treatment for anxiety or trauma, rebuilding routines and learning to tolerate feelings that cannabis previously softened.

Withdrawal and the first weeks

Sleep and mood can feel unsettled when regular use changes. Plan for irritability, cravings and disrupted routines rather than treating them as evidence that change is impossible. Keep days structured, eat regularly, use movement and ordinary sleep routines, and reduce exposure to the situations most strongly associated with use. If mood becomes severely low, anxiety becomes unmanageable or unusual perceptual/psychotic symptoms occur, seek professional help.

Supporting somebody else

Avoid arguing about whether cannabis is 'good' or 'bad'. Talk about specific changes you can both observe: anxiety, memory, money, motivation, missed commitments or the way use affects the relationship. Ask what cannabis is helping them manage. Encourage support while keeping boundaries around driving, children, finances, aggression and your own wellbeing. You can care about someone without pretending their cannabis use has no impact.

One book to explore

***Overcoming Your Alcohol or Drug Problem: Effective Recovery Strategies* - Dennis C. Daley and G. Alan Marlatt.** This is a broader substance-use recovery book rather than a cannabis-only title, but its practical approach to triggers, urges, consequences and relapse prevention fits cannabis patterns well. I like that it helps turn 'I should stop' into observable situations and choices. It can sit alongside professional support, particularly when cannabis is closely connected with anxiety, trauma, sleep or other mental-health needs.

A message from Maggie

Cannabis can be complicated because it may genuinely feel as though it helps something in the short term. That does not mean you have to ignore the parts that are becoming harder: the anxiety, lost motivation, memory problems, dependence or the feeling that you cannot relax without it. You can be curious about why you use and still decide that the cost has become too high. Change can begin with one honest look at the whole picture.

Clinical note

This guide is educational and does not replace individual medical or mental-health assessment. Cannabis products vary in potency and composition, and individual risks vary with age, frequency, health, other substances and personal vulnerability. Severe or persistent psychiatric symptoms require professional assessment. Service details and legal guidance can change and should be checked before publication.