

# What Older Adults Need to Know About Cannabis



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## What is Cannabis?

Cannabis, also called marijuana, weed, or pot, is a greenish-brown plant that contains more than 100 compounds known as cannabinoids. Many of these cannabinoids have effects on the mind and body. The two best known cannabinoids are delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD).

**THC:** THC is a psychologically active compound found in the cannabis plant. Those who consume it are more likely to report a feeling of “euphoria”, often also described as feeling “high”.

**CBD:** CBD does not cause the “high” or intoxication seen with THC. It is being researched for its potential therapeutic and medical effects. Some people use it to treat medical conditions, but others use it recreationally because they find it helps them relax and feel good.

Not all cannabis is the same. There are many types of cannabis plants, all with different levels of both THC and CBD. You need to know what levels of both THC and CBD are in your cannabis product to know how it might affect you.

## What Older Adults Need to Know About Cannabis

Cannabis plants have changed a lot over the years. The cannabis that was smoked through the 1970s had about 1% THC in it. By the late 1990s, cannabis usually had about 5% THC. Now, the cannabis plant has an average THC content of about 15% to 20%. The higher the dose of THC, the greater the chance of becoming intoxicated and experiencing negative effects.



## How Cannabis is Used

### *1. Inhalation (breathed-in)*

Cannabis can be inhaled as a “joint” (a cigarette containing marijuana leaves or marijuana and tobacco leaves combined) or via use of a bong (water pipe) or electronic vaporizer (also called “vaping”).

People usually feel the effects quickly when they inhale cannabis. The effects can start within seconds of the first inhalation and can last for about 6 hours. Some residual effects can last up to 24 hours.

### *2. Ingestion (eating)*

Cannabis can be prepared inside of foods (for example, in baked goods, candies, or salads) and then eaten. Food products that have cannabis in them are often called edible cannabis or “edibles”.

It takes longer (15 minutes to a few hours) to feel the effect of cannabis after eating it. The effects can last up to 12 hours, with some residual effects lasting up to 24 hours.

### *3. Tincture*

Cannabis tinctures are liquids containing concentrated cannabis. People use tinctures by putting drops of the liquid under their tongues or putting the liquid into drinks. People usually feel the effect of cannabis quickly when using a tincture.

### 4. Topical Application

Some cannabis products can be applied directly on the skin as lotions, rubs, or balms. It can take a few hours to start feeling the effects of cannabis that is used this way.

*If you choose to use cannabis, remember that it may take some time to feel the effects. Do not take more of the product if you do not feel the effects right away, or you risk taking too much.*



## How Cannabis Affects Older Adults

Older adults have more body fat and less muscle mass and water content in their bodies. This makes the body break substances down more slowly, which means they stay in the body longer. Because of this, the effects of substances like cannabis can be more intense and can last longer when you are older than they did when you were younger. These changes can also make you more sensitive to possible negative effects, such as dizziness, falls, and injuries.



## Risks of Using Cannabis

Anyone who is considering using cannabis should talk with their healthcare provider first. They can explain the potential side effects, dosages to start with, strains to avoid, and other ways to help ensure your safety. Your healthcare provider can also talk with you about medications that you take that might interact badly with cannabis.

Cannabis can make you feel:

- + Dull, sluggish, or sleepy
- + Calm, relaxed
- + Talkative
- + Fearful, anxious, depressed, panicked, scared, or paranoid

## DID YOU KNOW?

Be aware that the potential benefits vary from one person to another and can be influenced by factors such as medical history and family predisposition.

It can also cause:

- + Intoxication
- + Changes in perception (colours seem brighter, sounds more distinct)
- + Problems with concentration and short-term memory
- + Impaired coordination and balance
- + A rapid heartbeat
- + Shortness of breath or risk of bronchitis
- + Increased risk of a stroke
- + Changes in appetite or bowel movements or nausea and vomiting





## Medicinal Benefits of Cannabis

There is evidence to suggest that cannabis may be useful for several health ailments including:

- + Relieving chronic pain;
- + Stimulating appetite and producing weight gain;
- + Helping with nausea and vomiting due to chemotherapy; and
- + Reducing spasticity in multiple sclerosis.

We are finding out more about other potential medical properties of cannabis every day and will have more research and evidence in the coming years. If you have questions about the medical use of cannabis, speak with your healthcare provider.

## Cautions for Using Cannabis

Cannabis should not be used if you have any of the following conditions:

- ✚ Unstable blood pressure or heart conditions
- ✚ Changes in mental functioning (for example, memory or concentration problems)
- ✚ Difficulty with balance
- ✚ History of mental illness or substance use disorder (addiction)

### *Driving and Cannabis*

Driving after using cannabis is illegal and increases your risk of having an accident. If you have used cannabis, wait at least 24 hours before driving.





### *Is it ok to use cannabis when I'm taking prescription medication or other drugs?*

Cannabis can interact with medications and other drugs that you might currently be taking. Commonly used drugs and prescription medications that can interact with cannabis include:

- + Alcohol
- + Pain killers
- + Sleeping pills and other sedatives
- + Antidepressants

If you are taking any prescription drugs and/or other over-the-counter medications, speak with your healthcare provider or pharmacist about any possible interactions between your medications and cannabis.



### *What should I remember if I choose to use cannabis?*

- + Healthcare providers can help you stay safe; always discuss cannabis use with them.
- + Be sure to read the label carefully for information on the THC concentration.
- + Start low and go slow.
  - Look for products with low THC content, ideally less than 10%.
  - Start by taking a very small amount.
  - Allow some time for the effects to start (it can take minutes to hours); do not take more too soon.
- + Buy from a regulated source. Be very cautious about the content of your cannabis products

## Safety First!

Stopping cannabis suddenly can cause unpleasant, even dangerous side effects, known as withdrawal effects. To avoid these effects, your healthcare provider can help to develop a plan to reduce the amount you use very slowly.

### DID YOU KNOW?

If you choose to use cannabis, remember that it may take some time to feel the effects. Do not take more of the product if you do not feel the effects right away, or you risk taking too much.

## Where can I get more information about cannabis, addiction, and mental health?

Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH) [ccsmh.ca](http://ccsmh.ca)

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) [ccsa.ca](http://ccsa.ca)

Government of Canada – Cannabis in Canada: Get the Facts  
[www.canada.ca/en/services/health/campaigns/cannabis.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/campaigns/cannabis.html)

10 Ways to Reduce Risks to Your Health When Using Cannabis  
[www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca)

Information on legal use of cannabis from Ottawa Public Health  
[www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/know-the-law.aspx](http://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/know-the-law.aspx)

This brochure is adapted from the Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH) *Canadian Guideline on Cannabis Use Disorder Among Older Adults*.

**Disclaimer:** This brochure is intended for information purposes only. It is not intended to offer medical advice or be interpreted or used as a standard of medical practice.





Canadian Coalition  
for Seniors' Mental Health

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Coalition Canadienne pour  
la Santé Mentale des  
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