



# Key messages for young people

There are six primary key messages that inform the content delivered to young people in this package. These messages cover the primary learning objectives and are incorporated throughout the package and in the classroom activities developed for students. In this section we outline these key messages and make suggestions as to how they should be discussed.

## Most young people do not try or use cannabis

Data from the Australian Secondary Students' Alcohol and Drug (ASSAD) survey demonstrates an overall decline in cannabis use over the last decade (1). The proportion of students aged 12-17 years who reported having ever used cannabis has decreased significantly, from 25 per cent in 2002 to 14.8 per cent in 2011. As expected, the likelihood of reporting ever using cannabis increased with age from 3.4 per cent of 12 year olds to 29.2 per cent of 17 year olds. As such, in the most recent 2011 survey, just over 85 per cent of secondary students had never tried or used cannabis (1). The prevalence of lifetime cannabis use among Australian adults is provided by the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (2). In the most recent 2010 survey, 38.8 per cent of adults reported ever using cannabis. From this it can be understood that over 60 per cent of Australian adults have never used cannabis (2).

It is recommended that this information on the prevalence of cannabis use be presented with the emphasis being on the percentage of individuals who *do not use* cannabis. Given these percentages are much larger, doing so will help to normalise non-use and promote positive norms. Presenting the information in this way and changing normative expectations has been shown to be an effective component of drug education in schools (3).

## Using cannabis can have unwanted physical, social and emotional consequences. These can be immediate, short- or long-term

The effects of cannabis use vary between individuals as well as between occasions of use. That is, although the most commonly cited effect from using cannabis is a feeling of relaxation, for some people this may never be experienced, while feelings of paranoia and panic may be more common (4). Further, a feeling of euphoria may be felt on one occasion of smoking while this may not be felt by the same individual on the next occasion (4). Even smoking cannabis one time can result in harmful, unwanted effects. The most common such effect is the feeling of anxiety and panic (5). Following continued use the possibility of unwanted effects increases and many significant physical, social and emotional concerns are frequently reported by chronic users (6).

Informing students about the effects of cannabis use can be difficult given individual differences and an inability to accurately predict the consequences of use. That said, there are patterns of use which may increase the risk's associated with using the drug, including: smoking cannabis during early adolescence (7-10); using cannabis to help cope with a situation (11; 12); smoking with a low expectation of negative effects (13-15); and smoking cannabis frequently or in large quantities (6; 16; 17).

## Attitudes, values and beliefs vary among individuals and communities

Across the globe, cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug (18). Surveys of Australian illicit drug users highlight that cannabis is perceived to be inexpensive and easy to obtain (19; 20). According to the most recent National Drug Strategy Household Survey, almost one in ten Australians approve of the regular use of cannabis by adults (2).

Discussions regarding a student's personal cannabis-related beliefs should incorporate the influences of individual experience, peer and family values, social circumstances, community values, as well as global views. In this way, students are encouraged to respect the values and beliefs of others when making their own decisions which should ultimately be based on an accurate evidence base.

## Age of first use, quantity used and frequency of use, strongly influence long-term patterns of use, health outcomes and potential dependence

Most people who try cannabis do not progress to daily or regular use, however approximately one in ten cannabis users will become dependent users (7; 21; 22). As with other substance use disorders, cannabis dependence is



characterised by an impaired ability to control use and a difficulty to cease use despite knowledge that it is causing harm (23). When ceasing use, the experience of withdrawal symptoms, such as irritability and insomnia, are commonly experienced by dependent users (24; 25).

The strongest predictors of developing cannabis dependence include an early initiation to use as well as frequent and heavy use (daily use). When cannabis is smoked at an early age, the association with many negative health impacts is strengthened, including poorer long-term health outcomes (9; 26; 27), worse academic outcomes (28), social and legal problems (9), as well as a greater likelihood of developing dependence (7-10). The majority of health-related harms from cannabis use share a close relationship with the amount and frequency to which cannabis is smoked (6; 16; 17). In contrast, religious attendance, participation in volunteer work and a focus on relationships are protective factors of cannabis dependence. These protective factors increased the likelihood of never using cannabis by a mean of 1.4 to 1.9 times (29).

## Cannabis is illegal in Australia

In Australia, it is illegal to possess, use, grow or sell cannabis under federal and state law. The penalties for breaching these laws differ between the states and territories. Some jurisdictions have ‘decriminalised’ cannabis, meaning that if the cannabis in question is deemed to be ‘small’ (1-2 plants, or up to 25-50 grams of plant material) and for personal use, the penalty for a cannabis offence can be reduced to a fine without a criminal charge (i.e., a ‘civil penalty’, typically \$50-\$200). South Australia, Western Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory have decriminalised cannabis use. In the remaining states where cannabis is not decriminalised, a cannabis offence attracts a criminal charge, although minor offences are often diverted from the criminal justice system. For example, offenders caught with less than 50 grams of plant material in Queensland can agree to attend a drug assessment or brief intervention.

## Accessing credible information about cannabis is essential to making informed decisions

Although cannabis has been used in some cultures for many years there continue to be many myths surrounding the drug and its use. As such, this package compiles the most recent and accurate information regarding cannabis use, particularly in regards to young people. In conjunction with this information it is essential to discuss how to access additional and credible evidence to better inform personal beliefs.

The activities linked to this key message enable students to explore accurate, up-to-date information and critically analyse its validity. Some information is conveyed through classroom discussion and is supported by self-facilitated research.

## References

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