

Cannabis is the most commonly used drug in the UK today. It is naturally occurring and is derived from the hemp plant *Cannabis Sativa*. The drug comes in various forms, the most common being 'hash', a dark brown lump made from the resin of the plant. Another variety of the drug is 'weed' or 'grass', a green or grey mixture of dried leaves from the plant. It is usually smoked with tobacco in a cigarette (known as a 'joint') or in a pipe or bong, but can also be made into a tea or used as an ingredient in food such as 'hash cakes'.

The main component of cannabis is tetrahydrocannabinol or THC which has a mild hallucinogenic effect. If being smoked, the user will begin to experience the effects of the drug within minutes. These include, feeling chilled out, happy and relaxed, more talkative, a distorted perception of the world around them, and can often last for two or three hours. Smoking a stronger joint such as 'skunk' will intensify these reactions; 'skunk' typically containing 2-3 times the amount of the active component, THC.

While cannabis is not physically addictive like some other drugs, it is estimated that around 10% of regular users do develop a psychological dependence. Also, if you are smoking the drug and rolling it with tobacco, there is a risk of becoming addicted to the nicotine.

Cannabis is often seen as a harmless drug, and even by some to have beneficial affects. Note the recent news coverage of multiple sclerosis sufferers using the drug for the purpose of pain relief. It is not harmless however. Cannabis has many dangerous chemicals within it, and these can have both short and long term consequences. It can cause difficulties with memory and learning; loss of co-ordination; it increases heart rate and blood pressure and can bring on anxiety and panic attacks. Those who smoke cannabis long term are at risk of the same complications as tobacco smokers, such as lung disease or cancer. Finally, there is also the suggestion of a link between prolonged cannabis use and mental health problems such as schizophrenia.