

FACTSHEET 2

CANNABIS AND WORK

A typical situation

An employee reports the smell of cannabis on several occasions. They are not sure who is actually smoking, but have a pretty good idea.

This is a difficult situation because the employer cannot simply accuse someone of smoking cannabis without evidence. However, for legal and occupational health and safety reasons, cannabis use is not acceptable in the workplace.

Cannabis: The facts

Cannabis is made from dried flowers and leaves of the cannabis plant. It looks like chopped dried grass and its slang names include: 'dope', 'grass', 'pot', 'ganja', 'mull' and 'weed'.

Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in Australia. Approximately a third of people over the age of 14 acknowledge that they have tried it.

Short-term effects

In common with other psychoactive drugs, the effects of cannabis depend on the dose, individual and setting. Many of the following effects are perceived as positive by users. The most common effects include:

- relaxation
- sense of wellbeing (euphoria)
- disinhibition
- heightened visual and auditory perceptions
- increased appetite
- altered time perception
- concentration:
 - general difficulty
 - tendency to focus awareness on a particular activity.

Equipment for cannabis use

Cannabis is usually smoked in hand rolled cigarettes (joints) or in special pipes, which are often made of metal with a 'cone' on one end. It may also be smoked using a 'bong', which is essentially a cylindrically shaped water pipe. Sometimes it is mixed with food (e.g., cakes or biscuits) and eaten. It cannot be injected.

Smoking risks

Regular smoking of cannabis increases the risk of bronchitis, lung cancer and respiratory diseases associated with smoking. Research suggests that 3 cannabis joints have the same tar level as 20 cigarettes. Cannabis contains twice as many cancer causing agents as an equal amount of tobacco.

Cannabis is unpredictable when combined with other drugs

The risks of cannabis use can increase when combined with other drugs such as alcohol. When this happens, the effects of cannabis use often intensify in unpredictable ways.

Regular use of cannabis at a young age is associated with an increased risk of use of other drugs.

How does cannabis affect work performance?

The effects of cannabis vary between individuals and depend on the personality and mood of the user, concentration of the active ingredients in the drug, and the setting in which it is taken.

Operating machinery and driving a vehicle

Cannabis can affect balance, coordination, short-term memory and thinking processes. It also affects movement and may lead to a loss of concentration. The ability to perform relatively complex tasks such as driving or operating machinery is reduced after smoking even small amounts.

Cannabis is an illegal drug. This means it is also illegal for anyone to drive while under the influence of cannabis. Similar penalties apply as for drink driving. Anyone who kills or injures another person while driving under the influence of cannabis can be sentenced to prison.

Accidents

Cannabis decreases alertness and slows reaction times, potentially increasing the risk of accidents. High doses can result in poor performance of even simple manual tasks. Cannabis can cause an increase in the heart rate and a drop in blood pressure, which may result in fainting.

Under the rules for workers compensation, a disability is not compensable if it is wholly or predominantly due to the influence of cannabis.

Relations with customers and co-workers

In small doses, cannabis can lead to feelings of well-being (euphoria), loss of inhibition and a tendency to talk and laugh more than usual. It may also produce feelings of paranoia, which may make the user appear hesitant and a little dazed.

Other employees may be aware of cannabis use but be unsure of what they should do. This can lead to tension and strained relations between employees.

Ability to make decisions

Cannabis affects short-term memory and logical thinking and so the ability to make decisions may be impaired. This form of impaired work performance can be just as costly as accidents or injuries.



General skills

Regular users of cannabis may find they begin to lose energy and interest in other activities. Their performance at work may suffer. Some users may have decreased learning abilities, and find it hard to acquire new work skills.

The effects of cannabis may last 2 or 3 hours after smoking and usually lead to calm, reflective feelings and sleepiness later on. Other effects may be increased appetite or reddened eyes.

Hangover

There can also be a 'hangover' effect of drowsiness and poor coordination which may last for several more hours.

Longer-term effects

Some research has shown that the long-term regular smoking of cannabis may be associated with respiratory diseases. Heavy and regular use of cannabis may increase the risk of psychotic symptoms, especially if the person has a history of a major mental illness such as schizophrenia.

Cannabis and the law

Cannabis is a prohibited plant in Australia. Cultivating, selling, dealing, possessing, smoking or consuming the products of the plant is an offence and is subject to prosecution.

Each state and territory has different cannabis laws.

Employers' legal obligations

There is no penalty for an employer if cannabis is used at the worksite except when it is an occupational health and safety issue, nor are they obliged to inform the police. Cannabis use in the workplace is not acceptable because of the illegal nature of the drug and for health and safety reasons.

There is no 'sure fire' way to detect cannabis or other drug use.

Symptoms associated with various drugs are the same as those that occur with a number of common place events. For example, constant red eyes may indicate chronic cannabis use, but may also indicate hay fever, an allergy, tiredness or the use of the local swimming pool.

Some employers may consider drug testing, however, it is expensive and fraught with difficulties. Drug testing is discussed further in Section 7 of the Information and Resource Package.

Summary

Cannabis use is not acceptable in the workplace because:

- it is an illegal substance
- the legal penalties for using cannabis in the workplace may include a fine and a criminal conviction
- work performance may be affected
- the safety of the user and others may be affected
- it puts other workers and the owner or manager in a difficult position
- under workers compensation rules, a disability is not compensable if it is wholly or predominantly due to the influence of cannabis.

Further information or help concerning cannabis can be obtained from the websites and organisations listed in Booklet 2 of the Information and Resource Package.

