

Cannabis and mental health

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The cannabis debate reignited recently with the reclassification of cannabis to a Class C drug. Much of the debate centred on recent evidence about the link between cannabis use and mental health, a concern that has shadowed cannabis use for the last century. The evidence is perhaps more nuanced than opponents and proponents of reclassification claimed and as ever more research is needed to pin down the exact nature of the link between cannabis and mental health.

Can you become dependent on cannabis?

Using the findings from a range of epidemiological studies it has been estimated that one in ten of people who use cannabis, rising to one in two of those who are heavy smokers, meet criteria for a diagnosis of dependence as laid out by the standard psychiatric tool, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III-R and DSM-IV) of the American Psychiatric Association. The DSM concept of dependence has a broad conception of dependence. Laboratory studies have shown tolerance to many of the behavioural and physiological effects of the main psychoactive constituent of cannabis, tetrahydrocannabinol, can develop. Other laboratory studies have found evidence of withdrawal symptoms among heavy users. Finally, clinical and epidemiological work have shown that heavy cannabis users can experience other DSM criteria for dependence such as having problems controlling their cannabis use, despite experiencing some adverse effects and advice to stop or frequent intoxication during daily activities.

Is there a link between cannabis and psychosis?

There is a range of studies showing that cannabis users can experience transient psychotic symptoms such as thought disorder, hallucinations and delusional ideas after using high doses. There is also evidence that cannabis can exacerbate the symptoms of schizophrenia, the condition where these psychotic symptoms persist for at least six months. Patients using cannabis have been found not to do as well in



treatment as those who do not use. Studies have shown that it can precipitate schizophrenia in those who may be vulnerable because they have a personal or family history of schizophrenia. There is also evidence that cannabis may be a causal factor in the development of schizophrenia in those without a personal or family history of the disorder. However, schizophrenia covers a broad range of clinical features and a wide range of causal factors of the disorder has been identified. The relative importance of these factors needs to be determined so it remains uncertain how cannabis fits into the complex cluster of factors leading to schizophrenia.

What is the link between depression and cannabis use?

Surveys have identified an association between heavy cannabis use and depression in adolescents and young adults. However, the research evidence is not available to determine whether this link is a result of common family, social and other factors that increase the risk of both heavy cannabis use and depression. There is no evidence to suggest that there is an increased risk of depression for occasional users of cannabis.

What are the effects on cognitive functioning?

There is no evidence that cannabis use causes major cognitive impairment such as that seen in heavy alcohol drinkers. There is some research showing that long-term daily cannabis use can produce slight changes in memory and attention but the significance of these changes is uncertain. They may reflect the lingering effects of heavy cannabis use or be the results of the cumulative effect of cannabis on cannabis receptors. It is also unclear whether these changes can have an impact on daily life and whether sustained abstinence from cannabis use leads to a complete reinstatement of these cognitive abilities.

Is there an "amotivational syndrome" associated with cannabis use?

Field studies in several countries in the 1970s found some heavy cannabis smokers with impaired motivation. However this finding was not replicated across all the field studies, nor has it been supported by laboratory or controlled studies. Commentators suggest that the signs of impaired motivation that can be observed in some cannabis users may be symptoms of cannabis intoxication among individuals who are dependent on cannabis.

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