

## Response to Request for Information

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Date            19 February 2018

### ***Parental Awareness on the Risks of Cannabis***

#### **Request:**

What policies or procedures does the Local Authority have in place to ensure parents are informed on the risks of cannabis so that they can better safeguard their children?

In response to your above question, I can inform you that our commissioned service for specialist substance misuse Recovery Near You (RNY) would, at assessment, give information to service users who are concerned about a particular substance ie Cannabis. RNY visits College's and Universities to give advice and education around substance misuse and would be available to give confidential advice to any individual who was concerned.

Our young people service W360 offer the same advice to schools and parents.

W360 get calls from parents concerned about their children's substance use on a fairly regular basis. They always ask the parent guardian to try to open a calm and non-judgemental dialogue with the young person. There are many reasons for this, with the main ones being that general teenage behaviour, (sleeping all day, being secretive, hanging around with people you are unhappy with, having no money etc..) may be indicative of drug use, or of a teenager just being a teenager. Asking them openly if they are using substances, whilst advising that they aren't in any trouble is usually the best approach and will get the best response.

If the young person admits that they are using substances then we ask the parent to discuss accessing our service. We are, of course happy to speak to children and young people directly about what we do and how we can help them as long as they give their consent to this. We try not to worry parents unduly, as the majority of children and young people will be dabbling and experimenting with alcohol and drugs, rather than having formed a dependency.

If the child/young person consents then we will contact them directly and have a chat about meeting up wherever they are comfortable. It's worth noting that we will share information, (where requested) on treatment progress with parents as long as we have the consent of the child/young person, when the child/young person is over the age of 14 and is assessed as having competency. Under that age, or without competency we will always seek parents consent for a child to enter into treatment.

# WHAT'S CANNABIS GOT TO DO WITH IT?

## IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL OR EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

Although it is still against the law to supply or use cannabis, many people in UK do use it or have tried it in the past. It is important for people with psychological problems to know something about cannabis if they have used it or are thinking about trying it. This leaflet answers some of the questions that are important in making your decision.

### DOES CANNABIS CAUSE MENTAL ILLNESS?

Major mental illnesses like schizophrenia and bipolar illness are no more common now than they were in times when pot was uncommon, so it is not likely that cannabis-causes these illnesses.

However, if you have emotional or psychological problems, you should know that people who use cannabis have more episodes of their illness and relapse more often. They generally have to spend more time in hospital than non users. People with mental disorder who use cannabis become paranoid and suspicious very easily and can suffer from severe depression which may also require treatment in a hospital.

### WHAT'S IN CANNABIS?

Cannabis contains about 60 compounds called cannabinoids. The one that produces the buzz is called Tetrahydrocannabinol or THC. THC is more concentrated in skunk and hash oil than in resin forms, and the amount of THC also varies a lot from plant to plant, so it's hard to predict how potent cannabis will be. Smoking delivers THC more quickly than eating it. A bong stops smoke

getting "lost" in the air but it burns hotter and therefore destroys some of the THC.

There are more than 400 chemicals in cannabis. We don't understand all of them, but they include many of the same cancer causing tars as tobacco. Smoking cannabis can deliver three times more tar into the lungs than tobacco and more and more cannabis users are developing lung and other cancers.

### HOW DOES CANNABIS WORK?

The smoke from it carries THC into the lungs, through the tissues of the lung wall and into the bloodstream. From there it goes directly to the brain and is absorbed into the fat molecules which make up the brain's cellular membranes. THC and the other cannabinoids remain dissolved in the fatty tissues of the brain as well as in the liver, kidneys, lungs and glands, including the sex organs (testes and ovaries). It takes weeks for them to slowly dissolve back into the bloodstream, which can lead to users being effected without knowing it. In the brain, the THC molecules bind with specific receptors causing the information processing system to become distorted. It effects the parts of the brain to do with balance, glucose craving, the perception of time, sound and colour.

That's why time seems to pass differently when you are stoned, and sounds, colours and images can be magnified, changed or distorted. It also explains why

people get "the munchies". Some people complain of putting on weight as a result.

### IS CANNABIS ADDICTIVE?

The "high" which it produces is caused by THC acting on brain receptors which carry messages between nerve cells to regulate our senses, thoughts and feelings. Regular or long term use causes these cells to adapt to THC, leading to tolerance, meaning users can need larger (or stronger) doses to get high and have withdrawals when they stop or reduce the amount suddenly. So it can be physically addictive. Users also develop psychological dependence, which is even harder to break than physical addiction.

### IS CANNABIS A DANGEROUS DRUG?

It's a risk drug. It effects your judgement and alters your sense of time and distance. It is not a good idea to smoke if you are pregnant or planning to have a baby. There is good evidence that heavy use damages genes which could lead to miscarriages or possibly genetic faults in children. While it's useless as a contraceptive, it still reduces the number and mortality of sperm in men and can interfere with ovulation in women.

Regular cannabis use reduces your ability to concentrate and recall information. THC is easily absorbed by the part of the brain where short term memory is processed (the hippocampus). That makes learning difficult. If you feel you can only work or study properly when you are

using you may in fact be experiencing withdrawals. They can take up to 6 weeks to pass. In some cases, stress is the problem and work or study will improve with stress reduction techniques. A number of studies suggest that cannabis can reduce the ability of the body to fight infection.

## **CANNABIS AND OTHER DRUGS**

Apart from road traffic and drowning accidents, there appears to be no records of anyone dying just because they have used THC. Taken with other drugs it is a lot more dangerous. The effects are unpredictable and can lead to an overdose by multiplying the effect of some drugs and changing the effects of others. THC & Alcohol – Both lower the blood pressure and both affect your balance and judgement. When you drink and smoke pot, the combination is more than the sum of the drugs you have in your body. Alcohol acts like an anaesthetic; too much will even stop your breathing reflex and your heartbeat. Before getting to that stage, most people will have got rid of a lot of alcohol by throwing up. But THC prevents vomiting (one of the reasons it is sometimes used by cancer patients on chemotherapy), and this can lead to alcoholic poisoning and even death. Similar problems can occur with other drugs which depress the body's nervous system and effect your breathing, including heroin, sleeping tablets and Valium-type drugs (benzos).

THC & Stimulants – Speed, cocaine, ecstasy and other drugs have some effects which are similar to cannabis and some which are opposite, cannabis can also raise the heart rate from 70

beats per minute up to 100 or more. Beating that fast the heart needs extra oxygen, but cannabis replaces a lot of the oxygen in the blood stream with poisonous carbon monoxide. Drugs like speed also increase the heart rate, and they make it irregular and inefficient. Taken in combination with cocaine or speed THC can make the heart race out of control and push your blood pressure high enough to cause a stroke. The chances of this increase as you get older.

## **PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATION & CANNABIS**

Many people say that cannabis relieves unpleasant side effects of medication especially muscle stiffness and shakes. That can be true: it is an anticholinergic drug like the side-effect medications procyclidine and benzhexol.

But if you take these drugs and smoke cannabis, you may overdose which may cause confusion, disorientation and severe physical effects – an anticholinergic event. People have died from it.

Side effect pills can also cause dry mouth, red itchy eyes and tremor, which gets worse if you use cannabis.

Some people blame their medication for making them depressed or bored. Cannabis is not the best way to handle this, cannabis users end up in hospital for depression and suicidal thoughts more often than nonusers who have mental problems. You're better off negotiating with your doctor about your medication.

THC and medications for mental illness bind to the same nerve

receptors which is why THC stops your medications working properly, leading to higher doses and worse side effects.

Cannabis can speed up the metabolism of anti-depressant and anti-psychotic medication therefore higher doses end up being prescribed to compensate.

It's a fact that people find smoking cannabis pleasant. If it becomes your main social occupation it will be hard to get into other activities, make plans and follow through on them, especially if everyone you know is using. Counselling and other support may help you find new things to do and a new social group.

If you want to know more about cannabis and your mental health or want a fact sheet on another substance call Manchester Dual Diagnosis Service on 0161 720 2005.

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