

Lower Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth, By Youth



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Lower Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth, by Youth

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Executive Summary

Currently, cannabis use is legal for adults in Canada but illegal for youth under age 18. Canadian Lower Risk Cannabis Guidelines have been developed for adults 18 years and older as a public health promotion tool in order to reduce potential risks. However, there are no parallel youth-led and evidence-based lower risk guidelines for young people under age 18.

To develop lower-risk cannabis use guidelines for youth, we adopted a multi-prong research approach which included: 1) a digital environmental scan of existing cannabis use guidelines; 2) a scoping review of meta-analyses and literature reviews of the impact of cannabis on young people; 3) a quantitative survey that examined personal and event-level factors associated with positive and negative experiences among youth using cannabis; and 4) engagement with a Working Group of young people with lived experience of cannabis use to elicit feedback and guidance for each stage of data collection and analysis.

Results from the quantitative survey demonstrate that positive experiences while using cannabis were associated with more frequent cannabis use, having a stronger high, being in a less stressful environment, not using cannabis alone, and experiencing fewer or less severe negative symptoms. In contrast, having more negative experiences while using cannabis was associated with less frequent cannabis use, starting cannabis use at a younger age, getting higher than the user normally does, and having cannabis supplied by someone else. Based on these results, along with findings from the scoping review and qualitative feedback from the Working Group, the research team drafted six guidelines to help young people minimize the harms and maximize the positive effects of cannabis use: (1) Get educated before you use; (2) Know your reasons for using cannabis and pay attention to how it is affecting you; (3) It is okay to wait until you are older or to not use cannabis at all; (4) Start low, go slow; (5) Consider where you are and who you use with; and (6) Choose your products and how you use carefully. The last step in developing the guidelines involved receiving feedback from the Working Group on the feasibility and acceptability of the guidelines based on their own lived experience.

These guidelines are intended to offer evidence-based and youth-led strategies to help young people who use cannabis. The variety of evidence supporting these guidelines and the focus on youths' lived experience provides nuanced, practical, and feasible strategies to help mitigate the harms of cannabis while maximizing the event-level benefits.

This bulletin is an abbreviated version highlighting the six youth-developed guidelines. A full report on the guidelines can be found at youthcannabis.cisur.ca.

Key Messages

- Youth who use cannabis report a number of positive but also negative experiences while using and there are various factors that influence the quality of their experiences.
- Environment and social contexts are key factors that shape youths' experiences with cannabis use, yet these factors are often unaddressed in public health messaging.
- Lower-risk cannabis use guidelines need to account for the multi-level factors that affect the experiences youth have with cannabis use in order to help them make more informed decisions about their use.

LOWER RISK CANNABIS USE GUIDELINES FOR YOUTH, BY YOUTH

1. Get educated before you use.

Frequent cannabis use can have negative health and social outcomes. Being educated about cannabis use is an important way to reduce harms and maximize benefits. Some important factors to be educated about include the different ways of using cannabis, the differences between Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and Cannabidiol (CBD), the legal status of cannabis in your province, and the long-term effects of cannabis use.

Educate yourselves on the strength and the type of strain of the cannabis. Be aware of your triggers and always make sure you are in a safe place.

2. Know your reasons for using cannabis and pay attention to how it's affecting you.

Young people use cannabis for a variety of reasons, such as to experience positive sensations, to relax or deal with boredom, to cope with negative mental health, to help in social situations, to deal with chronic pain, and as a substitute for other drugs or alcohol. Make sure that you are aware of your reasons for using and whether cannabis is benefitting you now and in the future.

Don't use it to cope with things; cope in other ways and use it because you enjoy it.

In the long-term, cannabis use has been linked to worse mental health, particularly regarding anxiety, mood disorders and psychosis. Using more than once or twice per week can lead to negative mental health outcomes. Beyond mental health, cannabis can negatively impact cognition, psychomotor control, attention, concentration, decision-making skills, impulsivity, and reaction time. These effects were found to be stronger among younger users.

Experiences with the long-term impact of cannabis use vary between individuals and youth should be mindful about how their health and wellbeing change over time as they use cannabis. Being aware of these effects is important in ensuring you get the most out of your cannabis use. If you begin to experience adverse effects, it may be time to limit your cannabis use. Some users can experience withdrawal symptoms when cutting down their

cannabis use. If you are having trouble cutting down on your cannabis use, find support, such as through a medical or mental health professional.

3. It's okay to wait until you're older or to not use cannabis at all.

There is no "right" time to start using cannabis and it's okay not to use at all. Consider the reasons why you want to start using cannabis and whether you can wait until you're older or until you have more information about cannabis use. Some evidence has shown that cannabis use can impact the developing brain and suggest that it is best for young people to wait until the brain has fully developed before using. Some groups of young people, such as those experiencing severe mental health challenges, those with a family history of psychosis, and those who are pregnant, should try to delay their cannabis use. However, the choice to use cannabis must be weighed carefully by all individuals and they must choose for themselves whether using is appropriate.

I smoked cannabis every day for 3 years at a young age. I eventually had to stop due to developing severe anxiety. I could not sleep without it and I had built a strong dependence on it which really affected my life. I feel as though I shouldn't have started smoking till the age I am now (20) because I think it affected my brain development, motivation, and even may have given me depression.

Use in moderation, we need more education on how to use cannabis moderately and like, how to find low THC options for beginners.

4. Start low, go slow.

For young people who do not know their limits or who are inexperienced with using cannabis, one of the most important things you can do is be careful about your use. Youth can have a number of positive experiences while using cannabis and most of the time youth are able to achieve these experiences. For an experienced user, a strong high can be a positive experience. However, it is easy to overdo it. Getting higher than you intend to can increase your likelihood of having a bad experience. When people use too much cannabis, it can lead to nausea, sweating, and vomiting ("greening out"). Practicing starting low and going slow by initially using at low doses and using less frequently can help you learn where your tolerance is and how you are impacted by the substances you use. Using less frequently can also help minimize

negative long-term effects. The impacts of cannabis can vary based on a number of factors and you may have a different tolerance than the people you are with. It is okay to use less than the people you are with.

Importantly, the effects of cannabis vary by mode of consumption. In particular, edibles take longer to reach full effect (2-4 hours) compared to smoking or inhaling (30 minutes). For an edible, a starting dose is about 2.5 milligrams of THC. For a joint or inhalant, 1-3 puffs at 10% THC content and waiting for 30 minutes is a good starting dose. It is recommended to start with these dosages the first few times you use cannabis. If you are unsure about the exact THC content of your cannabis product, use less than you think you should and wait before consuming more. It is also okay to stay at a low dose every time.

5. Consider where you are and who you use with.

Your social setting and physical environment can affect your experience using cannabis. Using with people who you are familiar with can help create a sense of safety and increase positive experiences while using cannabis. Avoiding using drugs in social situations that are unfamiliar or dangerous is a key part to ensuring you are in a safe setting. Cannabis use while driving can be particularly dangerous, and is illegal in Canada, as it can lead to a slower reaction time and is associated with increased crash risk. You should always avoid driving when intoxicated with any substance, including cannabis.



6. Consider your products, and how you use, carefully whenever possible.

Not all cannabis products are created equal and it is important to know where your products come from. Knowing the source and type of product you are consuming is important for safer use. For example, synthetic cannabis products have been linked to abdominal distress, paranoia, and increased aggression. In addition to avoiding synthetic or contaminated products, it is also recommended that you should use higher CBD products and products with less than 10% THC. Waiting until you are of legal age to purchase cannabis can help you make informed decisions about the products you use when purchased from a regulated source.

Cannabis and other substances: Using cannabis with other substances, including alcohol and tobacco, can negatively affect your physical and mental health. Cannabis use can also have negative interactions with prescription medication; it is important to check that

cannabis does not interact with any medication you are using. Ask a pharmacist if you are unsure.

Mode of consumption: The way that you consume cannabis is important. Smoking leads to a quicker high but can lead to inflamed lungs and chronic cough. Deep-breathing techniques can be particularly harmful to lungs. Blunts contain more cannabis than joints which can lead to consuming more than intended. Bongs produce more tar and carbon monoxide which harm the lungs and can increase the risk of dependence. Some evidence shows that vaporizing natural cannabis is less harmful to your lungs and is associated with fewer respiratory symptoms. However, using “vape-pens” or “e-cigarettes” that use cannabis concentrates may contain additional toxins that lead to respiratory symptoms. Cannabis concentrates also contain higher levels of THC and you should be careful when using these products. Using edibles can help you avoid the respiratory effects of inhalation but is more difficult to dose and may lead to using more cannabis than intended because of the delayed onset of the drug’s effect that comes with ingestion. In brief, there are potential harms and benefits of each method of consumption and you should weigh these when deciding how to consume cannabis.

Read the full report on these guidelines at <http://youthcannabis.cisur.ca/>.