CANNABIS: Information for Older Adults & Caregivers

What is cannabis?

Cannabis is a drug that grows as a plant that contains chemicals called cannabinoids. The two main cannabinoids are **THC** (tetrahydrocannabinol) and **CBD** (cannabidiol):

- THC is psychoactive and acts on the brain to create a "high" feeling.
- CBD is not psychoactive and can lessen some of the effects of THC

How is cannabis used?

It can be inhaled by **smoking** like a cigarette or in a pipe, which means the cannabis is burned or by **vaping** using a vapourizer, e-cigarette or water pipe, which means the cannabis is heated to make vapor. Vaping is less harmful than smoking, but it is not harmless! The vapor contains aerosols or airborne particles that are potentially toxic. The long-term health effects of inhaling the substances in vaping products is unknown

THC is absorbed quickly in the lungs when it is inhaled. The effects are felt within minutes and can last six hours or more. Symptoms of poor lung health or disease can be worsened when cannabis is smoked or vaped.

It can be **eaten** or **drunk** in foods and drinks. When ingested, THC is absorbed more slowly. The effects are felt in 30 minutes to 2 hours and can last 12 hours or more.

How does cannabis use affect older adults?

As you age, the body and mind functions begin to slow down, and it may change how cannabis is processed in the body.

THC and CBD are processed differently as you age.

- The aging brain works slower. THC also affects how the brain functions by decreasing memory, reducing concentration and negatively affecting the ability to think and make decisions.
- The slower digestive system and reduced liver and kidney functions affect how the body processes and removes drugs like cannabis.
- Changes to muscles, bones, sensory functions (vision, hearing and smell) can increase risk of falls or injuries. These risks are greater when using THC.

Older adults with heart conditions are at greater risk for heart attack or stroke.

- Smoking cannabis can raise blood pressure and heart rate. This increases the risk of a cardiac event such as stroke, heart attack or arrythmias for those who have heart conditions.

- Cannabis can also lower blood pressure which can cause people to faint.

Cannabis use interferes with your prescription drugs and medications.

- Cannabis is a drug. It can interfere with your other prescriptions and over-the-counter medications. It is important to talk to your health care provider or pharmacist if thinking about using.

Cannabis can lead to mental health problems.

- Older adults can experience loneliness, isolation, depression or loss. Using cannabis to cope can make mental health problems worse.

- Using cannabis regularly or using it almost every day can lead to a cannabis use disorder or dependence. It can also raise your risk of psychosis and schizophrenia especially if there is a family history of these conditions. If you are dependent you may have unpleasant feelings such as being anxious, irritable, upset stomach, trouble sleeping, loss of appetite or sweating.

When should older adults NOT use cannabis?

Cannabis is a drug that has risks. Before using, speak to your health care provider. Older adults should avoid use if they have the following conditions:

- A history of mental health or substance use disorders

- Cognitive impairment such as memory loss, difficulty thinking or concentrating

- Heart and blood diseases such as arrhythmia, heart disease, unstable blood pressure or problems with balance or coordination

More questions? Visit Ottawapublichealth.ca/Info

Mental Health and Addiction Resources

Service Access to Recovery, MontfortRenaissance.ca; 613-241-5202 (16+ only)

Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services, Rideauwood.org; 613-724-4881

Maison Fraternité, MaisonFraternite.ca; 613-741-2523 (French only)

Drug and Alcohol Helpline, ConnexOntario.ca; 1-800-565-8603 (18+)