

Risks of Cannabis on Fertility, Pregnancy, Breastfeeding and Parenting



best start
meilleur départ

by/par health **nexus** santé

About this resource

This resource is for women and men who are thinking about becoming parents, are pregnant, or who are new parents. It provides information about the effects of cannabis:

- ❖ On fertility, pregnancy and breastfeeding
- ❖ On children and adolescents, when their mothers used cannabis during pregnancy
- ❖ On parenting

Legal use of cannabis doesn't necessarily make it safe. Using cannabis can have effects on health, learning, relationships, fertility, pregnancy and children.

This resource summarizes the current knowledge about the effects of cannabis. It does not focus on any potential therapeutic medical benefits of cannabis.



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What is cannabis?

A plant:

The cannabis plant can grow wild, and may be grown outdoors and indoors.

Other names:

Marijuana is a common term for cannabis in the form of dried flowers, leaves, stems or seeds. Other common terms are weed, pot and grass. Hash and hash oil also come from the cannabis plant.

Ingredients:

There are more than 700 chemical compounds contained in the cannabis plant.

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the chemical that makes people feel high.

Cannabidiol (CBD) is known for its medicinal qualities for pain, inflammation and anxiety. In contrast to THC, CBD does not make you feel as high. The medicinal effects of some strains are being studied, especially those with higher amounts of CBD.

Types:

There are different types of cannabis and the effects depend on the amount of THC, CBD, other chemicals, and their interactions. The THC content in cannabis has increased over the past several decades. Oils have the highest percentage of THC. For example, the THC content in edible cannabis products can vary widely, and can be potent.

Forms of use:

The dried flowers of the cannabis plant can be smoked, inhaled as a vapour, or added to foods or drinks. The oils can also be put in creams, and other products that are applied on the skin.

When cannabis is eaten in products, such as brownies, the effects are not felt right away. This may cause some people to eat more than they originally planned.



Key effects of cannabis

► There are many types of cannabis products.

People use cannabis to feel high, relaxed, or for medicinal purposes. The effects of using cannabis vary from one person to the other depending on:

- ❖ Your age and sex
- ❖ Potency of cannabis
- ❖ Amount, frequency and duration of use
- ❖ Your physical and mental health
- ❖ Your use of other substances, such as alcohol and other drugs (illegal, prescribed, over-the-counter)

The risks of using cannabis may include:

- ❖ Effects on short-term memory, attention and coordination
- ❖ Anxiety and mild to acute paranoia
- ❖ Increased appetite (can be a benefit for some people)
- ❖ Impact on physical health, including risk of cancer (there may be a higher risk of lung cancer among those who smoke cigarettes and smoke cannabis)
- ❖ Impact on mental health
- ❖ Impact on fertility, pregnancy and parenting

The effects of heavy use (1 or more joints per day) can last for several weeks, and even for years after stopping use. Evidence is showing a possible association between heavy regular cannabis use and the risk of developing, or worsening mental health symptoms.

For people at high-risk for mental health issues such as personal history of mood and anxiety disorders, or a family history of mental health disorders, the use of cannabis can increase the risk of developing a mental health disorder and increase the severity of the symptoms. In particular, there is a risk of a psychotic episode after cannabis use for those at risk.

Using tobacco and cannabis

Smoking tobacco and cannabis together (e.g. adding tobacco to cannabis joints) may increase cancer risk. Most people who smoke cannabis inhale more deeply as they hold the smoke in longer, exposing their lungs to more cancer-causing agents.

► There is increasing evidence that cannabis is harmful to early brain development especially if used before the age of 25 years.

Further studies are required to determine the full impact of early cannabis use on long term outcomes, and its association with academic and employment success.



Effects of cannabis when planning a pregnancy, when pregnant, and breastfeeding

- **There is no known safe amount of cannabis use in pregnancy and when breastfeeding.**

Here is what we know about cannabis:

Effects on conceiving:

Cannabis use may affect the ability to become pregnant. For example, heavy cannabis use has been linked to changes in menstrual cycle for women, and lower sperm count and poorer sperm quality in men.

Effects on pregnancy:

Some studies have shown that cannabis use may have some negative effects on pregnancy. For heavy cannabis users, and those who also use tobacco, cannabis may increase the risk of preterm birth.

Cannabis is often used with other drugs, such as alcohol. Alcohol and tobacco have very negative effects on pregnancy, and on the health of the fetus.

Some women report benefits from using cannabis to treat morning sickness during pregnancy. However, due to potential harms to the pregnancy, fetus and the mother, safer treatments should be discussed with a health care provider.



- **Pregnant women should take care of their health by eating well, taking prenatal vitamins, being physically active and getting rest.**

Seek advice from your prenatal care provider about the risks of your cannabis use before and during your pregnancy.

Remember to start prenatal care early.



Effects on the fetus:

Cannabis smoke contains many of the same harmful chemicals found in cigarette smoke. Smoking cannabis can reduce the supply of oxygen and nutrients to the fetus. Some studies show effects on the newborn such as lower birth weight, lower alertness and slower growth of the new baby. Cannabis has not been linked to birth defects. However, the effects on the developing brain may be lasting, as the baby grows to an adolescent and adult. For more details see page 5.

Effects on breastfeeding:

When a breastfeeding mother uses cannabis, THC passes into the breast milk and is taken into a baby's fat cells and brain. It can be stored for weeks. Some research found that infants exposed to THC through breast milk had slower motor development (affects baby's movements and responses). More studies are required to determine the true effect of cannabis exposure when breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding is still the healthiest choice for your baby.

Until further information about the potential harms is available, it is recommended that women stop using cannabis while they are pregnant, or while breastfeeding.

Caution is advised.

Long term effects on children and teens

Maternal cannabis use has been linked to effects on children's brain development, behaviour and mental health. The effects of cannabis use during pregnancy are more common among children of heavier users:

In Infancy:

- ❖ Decreased ability to self-soothe along with exaggerated startles
- ❖ Sleep disturbances

By age 3-6 years:

- ❖ Poorer memory and verbal reasoning skills
- ❖ Less attentive, easily distracted and more impulsive

By age 6-10 years:

- ❖ Hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention
- ❖ More difficulty making decisions
- ❖ More difficulty learning
- ❖ Symptoms of depression and anxiety

By age 14-16 years:

- ❖ Reduced school performance
- ❖ Delinquency problems
- ❖ Continued hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention
- ❖ More likely to start trying and using cannabis earlier



As a result of exposure to cannabis during pregnancy a child may have difficulties with learning, behaviour and mental health in later life.

If you are unable to stop using cannabis completely, try using less and less often.

Parenting and cannabis

There are many things to consider as a parent.

Second-hand cannabis smoke:

Smoke is harmful for all of us, especially during pregnancy, for babies and young children. Second-hand cannabis smoke may result in illness in infants and young children. It can also affect their alertness, understanding and judgement.

It is best not to smoke or vapourize cannabis in your home or around your baby or young children. For more information on second-hand tobacco smoke go to www.pregnets.org/mothers/SecondHand.aspx.



Safe storage:

It is important that children do not eat cannabis. It can make them very sick. Children can accidentally eat brownies or cookies made with cannabis. Keep cannabis products in child-resistant packaging. Store all cannabis products in a locked area. Make sure children cannot see or reach the locked area.



When children accidentally eat cannabis they may look fine at first. The reaction to the drug may not be immediate but show effects much later.

If you think your child ate cannabis, get medical help right away. Call the Ontario Poison Centre at 1-800-268-9017 or seek medical attention right away.

Call 911 immediately if your child seems ill, has difficulty breathing or if you are worried for other reasons.

Food safety hazard:

There are risks in edible cannabis products because when growing and processing cannabis it is exposed to molds, bacteria, heavy metals and pesticides.

This is a food safety concern. These concerns apply to cannabis that you buy either legally or illegally. Even if legal, and even if grown organically, the industry of foods containing cannabis is not regulated.

▶ **Until there is better regulation, and inspection of the cannabis industry, it may be risky to buy and use food products containing cannabis.**



Being high while parenting:

Being high while parenting can affect how you interact with your child. You may miss your baby's/child's cues for hunger, to be comforted, or to play and learn. Being attentive to your baby/child is important to their development.

Being high while parenting can also affect your ability to judge, to make good decisions and to protect your child from danger. Feeling more relaxed and mellow can result in having a slower reaction time and reduce your ability to attend to your child. The effects of cannabis can last for several hours.

▶ **Be sure that there is always someone available who is not high to take care of your child's needs.**

Make the most of your relationship with your child. It is through relationships with you, and other adults that your child learns to trust, learn and thrive.



Being high while driving:

Cannabis use slows your reaction time and your decision making skills. It also can make it harder to judge distances or time. Driving at a slower speed does not make it safer for you, for those in the vehicle and others on the road. Cannabis use increases the risk of a collision. When you use cannabis and alcohol together, it is even more dangerous.

- ▶ **Cannabis impairs your ability to operate a motor vehicle safely.**
- ▶ **Never drive while impaired!**
- ▶ **Drug-impaired driving by cannabis use is a criminal offense in Canada.**

Making decisions about cannabis use as a parent:

When making a decision about substance use, know the potential benefits and risks to your health, your relationships, your work or your finances.

- ▶ **As parents, there are many reasons to be cautious about your choices.**

You are encouraged to keep learning about the effects of cannabis as new information becomes available. Discuss your ideas and concerns with your health care provider. To learn more, see the links below.

Who to call for information or help

ConnexOntario – Addiction, Mental Health, and Problem Gambling Treatment Services

1-866-531-2600 or www.connexontario.ca

Local public health unit – to talk to a nurse to learn more

1-800-267-8097 or www.health.gov.on.ca/en/common/system/services/phu/locations.aspx

Motherisk – to get information on substance use in pregnancy

1-877-FAS-INFO (1-877-327-4636) or www.motherisk.org

Telehealth Ontario – 24/7 – to get fast, free medical advice

1-866-797-0000 or www.ontario.ca/page/get-medical-advice-telehealth-ontario

The Ontario Poison Centre – if your child has consumed an edible product

1-800-268-9017 or www.ontariopoisoncentre.ca

Resources

Are you pregnant or considering pregnancy? Did you know that the use of cannabis may be harmful to your baby?

www.pregnancyinfo.ca/learn-more

Cannabis and Pregnancy Don't Mix

<https://www.pregnancyinfo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CannabisFactsheetEN.pdf>

Cannabis in Canada. Get the facts

www.canada.ca/en/services/health/campaigns/cannabis.html

Thinking about using cannabis before or during pregnancy?

<https://canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/health-effects-before-during-pregnancy.html>

Thinking about using cannabis while parenting?

<https://canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/health-effects/parents.html>

8 Things You Need to Know about Cannabis, Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

https://www.pregnancyinfo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CannabisPoster_EN.pdf

10 Ways to Reduce Risks to Your Health When Using Cannabis

www.camh.ca/-/media/files/pdfs---reports-and-books---research/canadas-lower-risk-guidelines-cannabis-pdf.pdf

Questions you may want to ask your health care provider

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Have a conversation with your health care provider.

If your health care provider wants to know more, here are resources you can provide:

Health Impacts of Cannabis

www.ccsa.ca/Eng/topics/Cannabis/Health-Impacts-of-Cannabis/Pages/default.aspx

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