



A landmark report released by the MHCA found strong associations between mental illness and cannabis, although this is not the same as a causal link. Evidence suggests that regular cannabis use, particularly by those who begin using at a young age, increases the risk of mental illness. There is also evidence of a genetic vulnerability to psychosis being, in effect, triggered by cannabis use. Nonetheless, the social context in which cannabis use occurs clearly contributes to the strong association between cannabis use and mental illness.

The Report¹, *Where There's Smoke: Cannabis and Mental Health*, found that:

Cannabis use precipitates schizophrenia in people who have a family history of that mental illness.

Among those who used cannabis, it was found that there was a 2-3 times greater incidence of psychotic symptoms. However, the epidemiological data shows that cannabis cannot be considered a major causal factor.

More frequent cannabis use is associated with higher relapse rates for people with psychosis and more severe symptoms were associated with increased risk of cannabis relapse.

Cannabis can induce schizophrenia like symptoms in otherwise healthy individuals.

There is little evidence to support the idea that people commence using cannabis because of pre-existing illness, however it may be a factor in continuing to use cannabis (to alleviate the symptoms).

There is no clear causal link between cannabis and depression; however, there appears to be a link between early and regular cannabis use and later depression.

The link between suicide and cannabis has yet to be clarified.

There has been too little research into the links between cannabis and other mental illnesses such as bipolar disorder and personality disorders to draw conclusions.

There is no doubt that heavy cannabis users suffer significant cognitive impairment for up to a week after cessation of use but there does not appear to be either lasting or irreversible cognitive impairment.

Among people with mental illness, particularly psychosis, the rates of cannabis dependence are significantly higher than in the wider community. Weekly cannabis use has been shown to be 3.3 times more prevalent among people with psychosis than among the general population. People with anxiety and depression also show higher rates of heavy cannabis use.

Recent public debate has also raised a conjecture over the increasing potency of cannabis. Hydroponically grown cannabis, the advent of European-bred sinsemilla cannabis plants and increased use of more potent heads have all been identified as reasons for an increase in the potency of cannabis used in Australia. However, there is a lack of data to support this assertion.

¹ *Where There's Smoke: Cannabis and Mental Health* can be obtained by contacting the Mental Health Council of Australia on 02 6285 3100 or <http://www.mhca.org.au>

