



Cannabis Legalization and Student Use in Simcoe Muskoka

FAQ and supports for educators

A Note on Terminology: *for the purposes of this document, the term cannabis is preferred over the commonly used word marijuana. Cannabis refers to the whole plant (*Cannabis sativa* and *Cannabis indica*), and the substances extracted from it, whereas marijuana is a term originally coined to refer specifically to the leaves and flowers of the plant.*

What is cannabis?

Cannabis products (aka weed, bud, pot) come from the dried leaves and flowering tops of the cannabis plant. Before the flowers are mature, the buds become coated with a sticky resin. This resin can be dried and pressed to make hash or hashish. Cannabis concentrates are made through extraction processes that pull out concentrated amounts of the plant's chemical compounds. Various names of resin extracts—hash oil, honey oil, shatter, wax, butter—are based on the consistency of the product.

Cannabis is consumed recreationally for its mind-altering effects; there are also many medical uses for the drug.

What will legalization of cannabis allow?

On April 13, 2017, the federal government tabled the [Cannabis Act \(Bill C-45\)](#) and [An Act to Amend the Criminal Code \(Bill C-46\)](#). The proposed Cannabis Act will create a strict legal framework for controlling the production, distribution, sale and possession of cannabis. As proposed, Bill C-46 creates new offences for impaired driving (impaired by cannabis) and strengthens the Criminal Code with regards to impaired driving for alcohol, cannabis and other drugs. The federal government plans to have the two acts come into force in July 2018.

In the meantime, it is important to be aware that possessing and selling cannabis for non-medical purposes is still illegal in Canada. Storefront operations selling cannabis products are not licensed by Health Canada and under the current law are illegal. Moreover, young drivers need to be aware that police are able to detect drivers who are high on cannabis. Driving while impaired by any drug (even if prescribed by a doctor) is an offence under the Criminal Code of Canada and those convicted face the same penalties as those impaired by alcohol.

What does legalization of cannabis mean for youth?

The Cannabis Act sets 18 as the minimum age for consuming legally obtained cannabis. Each province or territory, though, can use their own provincial age of majority (which may be higher than 18). The Province of Ontario has announced it will be setting the minimum age at 19 years of age. The proposed federal legislation also sets up regulations related to promotion or enticements to use cannabis, and criminal penalties for adults who provide (sell, share) cannabis to underage youth.

The Ontario government has established the Ontario Legalization of Cannabis Secretariat, led by the Ministry of the Attorney General and the Ministry of Education to develop additional policies and programs to protect public health, with a focus on youth and other vulnerable populations.

Why is the federal government legalizing cannabis?

Cannabis has been illegal in Canada since 1923. Prohibition has been an ineffective control with Canada having high rates of cannabis use, particularly among youth (see statistics below), despite its illegal status. The financial cost to enforce the current law is significant. The social cost to those who use cannabis and have become involved in the criminal justice system is disproportionately high, relative to the health dangers of the drug itself. Harm from the law is greater on disadvantaged groups and youth. For example, convictions result in criminal records that reduce opportunities for education, employment, and travel. The illegal status of cannabis has also created fertile ground for organized crime and violence. Hence, students fearing reprisal for its use, may be less likely to ask for help to address problematic cannabis use. Therefore legalizing and strictly regulating cannabis may help protect the health and safety of our youth.

What do we know about student cannabis use?

- 24% of Simcoe Muskoka area students (Grades 7-12) reported using cannabis in the past year (similar to the overall provincial average of 21%).
- In Simcoe Muskoka, cannabis use among secondary students increases significantly by grade, with approximately 42% of Grade 11 and 12 students reporting using cannabis in the past year (similar to overall provincial average of 36%).
- Male and female students equally reported using cannabis in the past year.
- Cannabis use among Ontario students declined significantly between 2003 and 2015, dropping by nearly 10%.
- Most secondary students say that it is easy to get cannabis and that they usually get it from a friend.
- Teens use cannabis for many reasons including for the euphoric feelings or “high” it promotes, to relax, to experiment or to try something new, to fit in with a peer group, and to assist with coping with boredom, stress and mental health issues.
- Reasons youth do not use cannabis include fear of getting caught by parents or police; the stigma of being labelled a “drug user”; concerns about health risks, poor academic performance and the negative impacts on family relationships.
- One-third of secondary students feel that regular use of cannabis poses little risk to their health (perceiving cannabis to be less harmful than alcohol and other substances).
- Driving after using cannabis is more prevalent than driving after drinking among young drivers. In Ontario,
 - 10% of secondary students who drive reported driving a vehicle within one hour of using cannabis at least once during the past year.
 - And 12% of students report riding in a vehicle driven by someone who had been using drugs at least once in the past year.

What misperceptions do youth have about cannabis?

The most common misperceptions about cannabis are:

- It is natural and so it's harmless.
- It makes you a better driver.
- It helps you focus.
- It isn't addictive.
- Everyone is using it.

As mentioned, many youth perceive there is little risk associated with using cannabis. Research also shows that when young people perceive a drug to be less harmful or when they think that most of their peers are using a drug, they are more likely to use it. This is why it is important to share factual information with students about the use of cannabis among youth and other factual information about the risks of using cannabis, so that they can make informed decisions about their own use.

Why is cannabis use harmful for youth?

Regular and early use of cannabis in adolescence can cause harm to the developing brain and is linked with behavioral and mental health issues. While it is best not to use cannabis at all, young people can reduce their risks by waiting as long as possible before beginning use – ideally until their mid-twenties when the brain is fully developed.

Brain development

- Adolescence is a critical time for brain development; the brain is not fully developed until around age 25. The chemicals in cannabis can impede the same biological system that directs brain development.
- Cannabis use that begins in early adolescence, that is frequent and that continues over time interferes with the function and development of the brain.
- Cannabis has been shown to negatively impact a teen's perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning. These changes can reduce a young person's motivation and school performance, negatively affect decision making and increase risk taking behaviour.

Mental health

Frequent (daily or near daily) cannabis use is associated with an increased risk of suicide, depression and anxiety disorders. Regular use of cannabis in adolescence may also interfere with the development of important protective factors (e.g. developmental assets) and coping skills, contributing to mental health problems. In some people, cannabis use increases the risk of developing mental illnesses like psychosis or schizophrenia, especially in those who:

- start using cannabis at a young age,
- use cannabis frequently (daily or almost every day),
- have a personal or family history of psychosis and/or schizophrenia.

Dependence

Frequent use of cannabis can lead to dependence on the drug. Approximately 11% of people who use cannabis will develop a dependence. The risk of dependence increases if use starts in adolescence, with 17% developing dependence. Young people who use drugs or alcohol before age 14 are more likely to develop drug dependence issues at some point later in their lives, compared to those starting after 21 years.

People who develop dependence may also experience withdrawal symptoms if they suddenly stop using cannabis. Symptoms can include irritability, anxiety, upset stomach, loss of appetite, sweating and disturbed sleep.

Respiratory/lung issues

Cannabis smoke irritates the lungs. People who smoke cannabis daily or near-daily may develop a daily cough, bronchitis, increased mucus and wheezing. Cannabis smoke contains the same cancer-causing chemicals as tobacco smoke. Heavy cannabis smoking is strongly associated with tissue damage in the lungs. More research is needed to determine if this tissue damage increases the likelihood of developing lung cancer.

Second-hand smoke

All smoke is harmful to health. Second-hand cannabis smoke contains many of the same toxic chemicals as those found in tobacco smoke and which are known to cause cancer, heart and respiratory diseases.

Impaired Driving

Cannabis use slows reaction times and affects decision making skills. Cannabis also makes one feel less alert and makes it more difficult to concentrate and to react to unexpected situations. Mixing even small amounts of alcohol with cannabis greatly increases driving impairment.

Mixing cannabis with other substances

When cannabis is combined with alcohol the results can be unpredictable and result in greater impairment than had either of the drugs been used alone. Evidence indicates that having alcohol in your blood causes a faster absorption of THC. Combined cannabis and alcohol use can trigger intense dizziness, nausea and/or vomiting along with panic, anxiety or paranoia. Mixing cannabis with alcohol can also increase the risk of vulnerable people experiencing psychotic symptoms.

Smoking tobacco and cannabis together (e.g. adding tobacco to cannabis joints or smoking both in a bong) increases exposure to cancer-causing agents. There is also a greater risk of becoming dependent on cannabis because the withdrawal symptoms from using both of the drugs together are more severe than from using either one on its own.

Can cannabis be used medically by students while at school?

Cannabis for medical purposes was made legal in Canada in 2001 and is regulated under the [Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations \(ACMPR\)](#).

If a student identifies that they have been prescribed cannabis for medical purposes:

- The student must be in possession of a valid medical document
- The amount in possession must be under the legal limit
- The marijuana must be obtained through a licensed producer

A discussion with the student and their parents/guardians would be required. Please consult with School Board policies.

How can I talk to students about cannabis?

It is important for teachers, coaches and other trusted adults to be ready to talk with youth about cannabis and other drugs. Youth have identified it would have been beneficial for them to receive drug education and information immediately before they entered high school (between Grade 7 and 9) and ongoing throughout their education. Recommendations students have given about how they would like to learn about cannabis include:

- Avoiding using the “just say no” prevention approach and instead provide youth with unbiased, evidence-based information on both the positives and negatives of cannabis use.
- Providing relevant and realistic information. Youth are less likely to heed warnings of harms if they do not perceive the harm as something realistic to them.
- Providing information on topics they feel have not been previously covered (e.g., drug-impaired driving, effects on the brain and strategies to quit using cannabis).

Ontario's Health and Physical Education Curriculum (2015) provides an opportunity for educators to discuss health topics such as substance use with students. While learning about cannabis is specifically addressed in Grade 6, student learning about substance use is part of a continuum of learning that extends from Grades 1 to 12. Discussions and teaching about cannabis can be incorporated into overall and specific expectations under all three subheadings in the Healthy Living Strand: Understanding Healthy Concepts, Making Healthy Choices and Making Connections for Healthy Living. These discussions can also enhance Living Skills for students. Cannabis is also mentioned in the Social Sciences and Humanities and Canadian and World Studies – Law curricula offering further opportunities for student learning.

Where can I refer a student who may need help?

- **ConnexOntario, Drug and Alcohol Helpline:** Provides free and confidential health services information for people experiencing problems with alcohol, drugs, mental health or gambling. 1 800 565-8603 or www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca
- **Kids Help Phone:** 24/7 counselling online or on the phone at 1 800 668-6868 or www.kidshelpphone.ca
- **Good2talk:** Free, confidential and anonymous helpline (24/7/365) for post-secondary students (17-25) in Ontario that provides professional counselling and information and referrals on mental health, addictions and well-being. 1-866-925-5454, www.good2talk.ca

Curriculum Supports

- **Ministry of Education Memorandum - Legalization of Cannabis – Supports for Schools:** www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/memos/april2017/legalization_of_cannabis_en.pdf
- **Elementary educators:** www.simcoemuskokahealth.org/JFY/Schools/Educators/Elementary/HealthTopics/DrugsAndAlcohol.aspx
- **Secondary educators:** www.simcoemuskokahealth.org/JFY/Schools/Educators/Secondary/HealthTopics/DrugsAndAlcohol.aspx
- **Cycles** is a film-based resource that encourages teens to talk openly and honestly about decision-making and cannabis use: www.uvic.ca/research/centres/carbc/publications/helping-schools/cycles/index.php
- **iMinds** is a free health education resource for grades 9-10 which aims to help students maximize their drug literacy, by building knowledge and skills needed to survive and thrive in a world where drug use is common: www.uvic.ca/research/centres/carbc/publications/helping-schools/iminds/index.php
- **The Sweet Life Road Show** is a hands-on interactive experience that raises teens' awareness about the deadliest road risks, and shows them simple strategies to stay safe. One of the topics of focus is "Why marijuana and driving don't mix": www.teenslearntodrive.com/events/
- **Short animated video** about the effects of cannabis on the teenage brain: www.youtube.com/watch?V=FvszaF4vcNY

Additional Resources

- [Online Learning for the Effects of Cannabis Use during Adolescence](#) - Provides an excellent overview of the topic.
- [Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction \(CCSA\): Cannabis and Youth](#) – A great source of best practice information.
- [Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines](#) – Information on low-risk use of cannabis
- [Cannabis Talk Kit: Know how to talk with your teen](#) - Provides information for parents to support conversations with their teens about cannabis
- [Parent Action Pack](#) - Provides parents with information about alcohol and drugs to prepare parents to have conversations with their teens.

For more information

- Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit - call Health Connection at 1-877-721-7520 / 705-721-7520

