

decide to try it. This means they need accurate information about the drug to protect themselves from harm.

**Can you tell if teenagers are using cannabis?** Although truancy, falling performance at school and mood changes can be symptoms of cannabis use, they're also typical teenage problems, so don't jump to conclusions. If you suspect a young person is using cannabis or find evidence of drug use you may want to threaten or punish them. But it's better to stay calm and try to find out why they use the drug. Adolescents need to know their parents love them and want to help them. The fact that they're using a drug may mean they're troubled - but it may also mean they have only tried the drug once and may not try it again. If you're worried about a young person's drug use, don't hesitate to get help. It's a problem many parents share and nothing to be ashamed of - and early help may prevent more serious problems. For more information contact the Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Information Centre on (02) 9699 3552, or your local community health centre.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

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## How harmful is cannabis?

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## How harmful is cannabis?

Although around 50 per cent of people under 18 have tried cannabis, this doesn't mean all teenagers will try it - nor does it mean all teenagers who use it will have problems with cannabis. Trying out new things is part of adolescence and just because a young person tries any drug (including alcohol and tobacco) doesn't mean he or she will continue. Young people from all kinds of families and cultures try cannabis - it's not true that only teenagers who have problems or who come from certain kinds of families are likely to use it. To many teenagers, cannabis use is now seen as "normal". About one third of adults in Australia have tried cannabis.

**Why do teenagers use cannabis?** For the same reasons many adults use their own preferred drug, alcohol - they think it's fun and it makes them feel good and relaxed. As parents and grandparents with worries of our own, we sometimes forget that adolescence can be a difficult time, and that it's normal for teenagers to feel angry, stressed or depressed sometimes. So it's not surprising that some of them use a drug which is readily available and which, at least for a while, makes them feel better.

**What does cannabis look like?** Marijuana (the word for the dried plant) looks like dark green dried flowers. It's usually bought in small plastic self-sealing bags. Hashish (resin made from the dried flower tops) looks like a small sticky brown or black ball or block. Young people often smoke marijuana by mixing it with tobacco, packing it into a small brass cone and smoking it through a water pipe. These pipes are often made by making a hole in a plastic soft drink bottle and sticking a piece of garden hose into it. Marijuana is also mixed with tobacco to make a cigarette.

**How harmful is cannabis?** Although cannabis causes fewer health problems than many other drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, it's not harmless. Most cannabis smoked today is also much stronger than cannabis smoked 20 years ago. Some people believe smoking cannabis is safer than tobacco, but although it's less addictive than tobacco, many people become dependent on cannabis and find it hard to quit. Long term heavy use of cannabis can also increase the risk of lung disease. Another concern is that using cannabis daily or a few times a week can affect the ability to learn and remember things. Although this effect can be quite subtle, it may interfere with studying. However this problem should go away after the person has stopped using the drug for a while. Does cannabis cause mental illness? Most experts believe it doesn't - but it may trigger problems in people with a pre-disposition to mental illness. Regular use can also cause anxiety and confusion in some people. Some young people use cannabis with another illegal drug called LSD or "trips" - this is dangerous and may cause psychosis in some people.

**What should parents tell teenagers about cannabis?** Before discussing any drug with teenagers, always get your facts right first. Many young people know more about illegal drugs than parents do - and if you give them information they know isn't accurate, they may not believe other things you tell them. It's tempting for parents to exaggerate the dangers and social problems of drug use in the hope of frightening teenagers away from them, but this doesn't usually work. If teenagers see their friends using cannabis and coming to no real harm, they think their parents don't know what they're talking about. It's better to try and explain calmly (using the facts above) that marijuana isn't harmless. It's not true that giving teenagers facts about drugs encourages drug use - the reality is that cannabis is now readily available to teenagers and they may