



# CANNABIS & PSYCHOSIS

EDUCATION MANUAL  
& LIFESTYLE GUIDE

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# Does Cannabis Cause Psychotic Disorders Like Schizophrenia?

## A Guide for People at Clinical High Risk for Psychosis

### How Does Cannabis Affect the Brain?

- Cannabis (also called “weed,” “marijuana,” and “pot”) contains many different chemicals. Two of the most important are THC and CBD. THC produces cannabis’ “high” by interacting with brain cells.
- THC can cause pleasant short-term effects like euphoria and relaxation. But, it can also cause undesirable short-term effects like anxiety, paranoia, confusion about reality, seeing and hearing things that aren’t there, low mood, and rapid heartbeat. [1]
- CBD doesn’t cause a high and may help with mild anxiety relief [1]. But, most cannabis has very high THC and nearly zero CBD. [2]
- Heavy THC use changes the brain, causing some individuals difficulty with learning, memory, and motivation. [3]

## Does Cannabis Cause Psychotic Disorders?

Scientists are actively studying this. Here’s what’s currently known: [4-7]

- People who use cannabis as teens are more likely to develop psychotic disorders than never-users, especially if they used it heavily.
- We know cannabis alters brain development, but it’s still unclear whether cannabis causes this increased rate of psychotic disorders.
- Some important risk factors may be:
  - How often you use it
  - How high the THC level is
  - How young you started
  - If you experience psychosis-like symptoms while using cannabis
- Cannabis worsens symptoms and treatment outcomes in people with psychotic disorders.

## Cannabis Can Briefly Cause Psychosis-Like Symptoms:

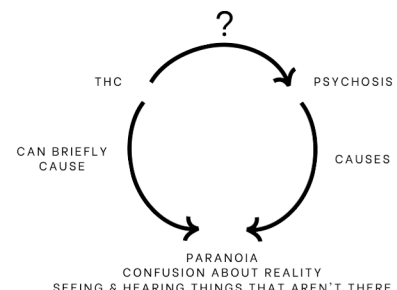
- Paranoia
- Confusion about reality
- Seeing & hearing things that aren’t there

People at clinical high risk who experience these symptoms with cannabis use may be almost 5 times more likely to develop a psychotic disorder. If you experience this, it’s important that you tell your providers so they can help! [6]

Consider switching to products with close to zero THC & high CBD



In one study, people who used high-potency cannabis (>10% THC) were nearly 5 times more likely to later develop a psychotic disorder than non-cannabis users [5]



# Harm Reduction Strategies

Since the science isn't settled yet, talk to your provider about what makes the most sense for your unique situation.

## Stopping is safest!

- Increased amount of cannabis use is associated with higher risk of developing a psychotic disorder. [4]
- Aside from the current uncertainty about whether cannabis causes psychotic disorders in the long term, cannabis is known to cause short-term psychosis-like symptoms and anxiety – especially in people already at high risk. [1, 8]

If you don't want to completely stop consuming cannabis, consider the following harm reduction strategies:

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Reduce your frequency of use

Example: cutting back from daily to once or twice per week  
Why: heavy cannabis users are almost 4x more likely to develop psychosis later in life [4]

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Avoid high-THC cannabis products

Examples: avoiding concentrates & choosing low-THC products  
Why: users of high-potency THC are more likely to experience psychotic-like symptoms both shortly after use & later in life [5, 9]

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Choose high-CBD, low-THC products

Examples: hemp, certain strains/concentrates (check the label!)  
Why: CBD may lessen some of THC's negative mental health effects BUT at doses higher than found in typical cannabis products [2]

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Be cautious with edibles

Why: unpredictable digestion time makes it easy to accidentally re-dose early and take too much. Edibles can also produce a stronger, longer-lasting high than inhaling THC. [10]

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*Remember: Talk to your provider if you experience psychosis-like symptoms during or shortly after using cannabis*

# Considering Motives

What are my motives for using cannabis?  
What do I enjoy about it?

Be specific! Here are some broad examples to help you brainstorm:

- I like the way it makes me feel (physically, mentally, etc.)
- It helps me cope with anxiety/low mood
- It makes socializing with my friends more enjoyable
- I do it to fit in at social gatherings
- I do it to pass time when I'm bored

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Are there any downsides to my current cannabis use?

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What are some other activities I enjoy that also address my motives for using cannabis?

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# Costs & Benefits

Weighing pros and cons can get tricky! Fill out this grid if you're undecided about whether to try changing your cannabis use.

Specific change I'm considering (ex. quitting, reducing frequency, switching to low-THC/high-CBD cannabis, etc.):

	CHANGING	NOT CHANGING
BENEFITS OF		
COSTS OF		

# Next Steps

After reflecting on the potential costs and benefits of making this change, what is my decision, and why?

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Steps I can take to make this transition easier:

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Other activities that provide the feelings I enjoy from cannabis:

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Challenges I anticipate in sticking with this plan:

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How I would explain this change to my friends, if necessary (so they understand and respect my decision):

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For young people experiencing psychosis-like symptoms, there are over 100 highly specialized clinics across the United States delivering expert early intervention care. Find a clinic near you at [nationalepinet.org/epinet-clinics](http://nationalepinet.org/epinet-clinics)

This brochure highlights key concepts from an academic journal article, “Assessing Evidence Supporting Cannabis Harm Reduction Practices for Adolescents at Clinical High-Risk for Psychosis: A Review and Clinical Implementation Tool” In press via *Psychological Medicine*, 2023.

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