Cannabis and psychosis

Cannabis is a legal and regulated psychoactive drug in Canada, currently used by about a quarter of adults and even more youth. Using cannabis is a personal choice and typically used for enjoyment. Cannabis can have short and long-term effects on mental health and well-being. Research shows that cannabis use is linked to psychosis-related risks and outcomes. Most people who use cannabis will not develop any serious mental health problems, but there are different ways or circumstances through which cannabis can contribute to psychotic experiences, psychotic disorders, or make existing psychotic symptoms worse.

Before using cannabis, it is important to know and understand how to reduce your risks of psychosis.

What is psychosis, psychotic disorders, or psychotic symptoms?

Psychosis or psychotic disorders, like schizophrenia, are serious mental health conditions that affect the human mind's normal understanding of reality and can cause symptoms including, but not limited to:

- → Paranoia or delusions
- → Seeing, hearing or feeling things that aren't there
- → Difficulty thinking clearly or concentrating
- → Having more trouble socialising and doing everyday tasks

Cannabis has natural psychoactive effects. In certain instances it can make people feel disoriented and experience psychotic-like symptoms, and more rarely contribute to severe, chronic psychosis. If you use cannabis often and are feeling unsure about your symptoms or want to know more about them, talk to your health care provider for more information.

References

Fischer, B.,Hall, W., Fidalgo, T. M., Hoch, E., Le Foll, B., Medina-Mora, M., Reimer, J., Tibbo, P. G., & Jutras-Aswad, D., (2023). Recommendations for Reducing the Risk of Cannabis Use-Related Adverse Psychosis Outcomes: A Public Mental Health-Oriented Evidence Review, Journal of Dual Diagnosis, 19(2-3):71-96, DOI: 10.1080/15504263.2023.2226588

Endorsements

The LRCUG-PSYCH have been endorsed by the following organizations:

SSC Schizophrenia Society of Canada

Canadian Public Health Association

Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse | Initiative canadienne de recherche en abus de substance

Canadian Consortium for Early Intervention in Psychosis

Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

Acknowledgements

The LRCUG-PSYCH development and dissemination are made possible through the support of Health Canada, Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services, the Université de Montréal's Expertise and Collaboration Center in Concurrent Disorders, and the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal Research Centre. Health Canada and Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services had no influence on the content of the LRCUG-PSYCH and related materials.

11 Recommendations to Reduce Risks of Psychosis when Using Cannabis

Based on the
Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Psychosis (LRCUG-PSYCH)

CECTC Centre d'expertise et de collaboration en troubles concomitants

CRCHUM Research Centre

Université de Montréal

11 Recommendations to Reduce Risks of Psychosis when Using Cannabis

*** The only way to completely prevent cannabis-related psychosis is to not use cannabis. If you choose to use, the following recommendations can help reduce your psychosis-related risks.**

1 Genetics

Some people are more likely to develop psychosis from cannabis. If you have had psychotic symptoms before, or you have a parent, brother, sister, or child with a psychotic disorder, you should ideally not use cannabis. If you choose to use cannabis, try to reduce how much and how often you use.

2 Age of use

The younger you start using cannabis, the higher the risk of psychosis. Avoid or delay using cannabis when you are in your adolescence. People over the age of 65 should also be cautious and keep the amount of cannabis they use low because of mental health-related risks.

3 Potency

Tetrahydocannabinol (THC) is the main cannabis component that creates the mind-altering experiences of use. It is also the main element responsible for psychosis related outcomes from cannabis. Using cannabis with more cannabidiol (CBD), which is non-intoxicating, may help reduce some of the risks associated to high levels of THC. If you use cannabis, choose products that are low in THC content or with a high CBD-to-THC ratio. Where possible, get your cannabis from a regulated source.

4 Frequency

The more often you use cannabis and your brain is exposed to it, the higher your risk of developing psychotic symptoms. Keeping your cannabis use to once per week or less is a good way of lowering your risks. Overall, try to limit your cannabis use as much as possible.

5 Mode-of-use

Different cannabis products have different risks. Be aware of the particular risks involved with the way you choose to consume cannabis and especially its associated intake of THC.

- → Ingestion (eg. edibles) usually involves lower doses of THC, but delays the onset of cannabis effects for 1-2 hours and makes them last longer, so be careful not to take too much.
- → Products used for inhalation (eg. smoking, vaping, bongs), and especially those that are high in THC can also have higher risks for psychosis.

6 Mixing substances

Avoid mixing cannabis with other substances like alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs. This will reduce the risk of cannabis-related psychosis and be better for your overall health.

7 Psychotic conditions

If you have psychosis already, using cannabis can make symptoms and your response to treatment worse. The best course of action is to stop using cannabis, or reduce how much you use as much as possible. Using low-THC and high-CBD cannabis products can also help with reducing risks of continued psychosis symptoms.

8 Medication interactions

Cannabis can interact with psychosis medications and might influence how well the treatment works. If you are being treated for a psychotic disorder, you should reduce or ideally stop using cannabis. If you continue to use cannabis, tell your healthcare provider so that they can find the best treatment for you and adjust if needed.

9 Taking breaks

If you have psychosis and are unable to stop using cannabis altogether, consider reducing how much you use or taking breaks from using (e.g. longer waiting periods between using). The benefits may take some time to appear, but this can improve psychosis symptoms in some instances.

10 Combining at-risk behaviours

Avoid combining multiple risk-factors as mentioned above. The more risks you take (for example, using cannabis that is high in THC often and at a young age) the more your risks of psychosis outcomes increase.

11 Other health problems

Psychosis isn't the only health problem that can be caused by cannabis use. Other risks include dependence, lung and heart problems, injuries from cannabis impairment (e.g., driving-related) and negative effects on pregnancy. To protect your overall health, be mindful of these risks and especially avoid frequent high-dose cannabis use.