Cannabis Counselling Service Tip Sheet

What is Cannabis?
Cannabis, or Marijuana, is known to be the second most frequently used drug by university students, with alcohol taking first place. In more technical terms, it is a Class C controlled drug, composed of dried plant material from the Indian hemp plant Cannabis Sativa. It can take many forms including hashish and oil, which contain slightly higher levels of THC (the active Cannabis ingredient). Cannabis is a Central Nervous System Depressant.

Why do people use Cannabis?
Some people use Cannabis because, in smaller doses, it has been known to relax the user and produce feelings of euphoria and increased social confidence. Sometimes people use Cannabis to escape their current problems, however, as the story goes, these problems always come back. Students may feel peer pressure to share a joint (a Cannabis cigarette) with their friends in a social setting, in much the same way they may feel the social pressure to use alcohol or cigarettes.
Why is Cannabis such a problem?
Particularly in high, frequent doses, Cannabis can:

- Increase the risk of accidents, due to impaired balance, coordination, short term memory and reaction time, and reduced attention, slowed information processing, motor performance and time perception.
- Effect your study or work performance by reducing concentration, short term memory and information processing.

What are the long term effects if I use Cannabis frequently?
Smoking Cannabis carries similar risks to smoking tobacco, including an increased risk of respiratory diseases such as acute bronchitis, lung, mouth and throat cancers. There is also a risk of ‘Amotivational Syndrome’, which involves reduced energy, drive and motivation for other things in your life.

Effects of Cannabis on mental health
A small percentage of users experience adverse psychological effects from Cannabis use. Some people may even experience their first panic attack during or after Cannabis use. There is increasing anecdotal information to suggest that even occasional Cannabis users and those that increase their amounts are becoming prone to anxiety disorders and panic attacks. Heavy or frequent users may be at risk of:

- Anxiety, panic, and paranoia
- Depression
- Psychotic symptoms, including delusions and hallucinations (at high doses)
- Amnesia, confusion, agitation and elevated mood, which can lead to harmful decision making.

I always thought Cannabis wasn’t addictive…
For occasional users, the possibility of developing a dependence on Cannabis is low. Frequent users can develop both physical and psychological dependencies however, which can result in an increased amount of Cannabis being needed for the person to feel ‘normal’. In other words, the anxiety, agitation and depression, which can be caused by heavy use, is often self-‘managed’ by choosing to increase the frequency and amount of Cannabis used.

What about the social/interpersonal effects?
Without a doubt, Cannabis use has been known to have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships. Intoxication with Cannabis can result in communication difficulties and a lack of responsibility in important tasks.

Those who are heavy users may find that financial difficulties also increase as you strive to meet the cost of sustaining your habit and precious time taken away from work and study. And of course, Cannabis use outside of prescription is illegal in Australia with users facing a possible criminal conviction.

Are there withdrawals if I stop using Cannabis?
Absolutely. When frequent, heavy users decide to quit using Cannabis you can experience withdrawals including: anxiety, restlessness and agitation, irritability, insomnia, marked weight loss, diarrhoea, hot flushes/sweating and some flu-like symptoms. The time taken for these symptoms to resolve depends on each individual and their use.

So what do I do if I want to give it up?
ECU Counsellors on each campus can direct you to professional services to treat your dependency.

A final thought …
“What hashish (Cannabis) gives with one hand it takes away with the other: that is to say it may give the power of imagination but takes the ability to profit by it” Baudelaire, 1860.

References
More information is available from:

- ReachOut: Cannabis (Marijuana) fact sheet (http://www.reachout.com.au)

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Please note that this tip-sheet provides information and guidance only - it is not a substitute for professional counselling and support.

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