

WHAT & WHY?

# CANNABIS<sup>1</sup>

**weed : dope : bud : skunk : hash : oil**

No. 1 in a series of guides to help people understand  
what drugs are and why people take them

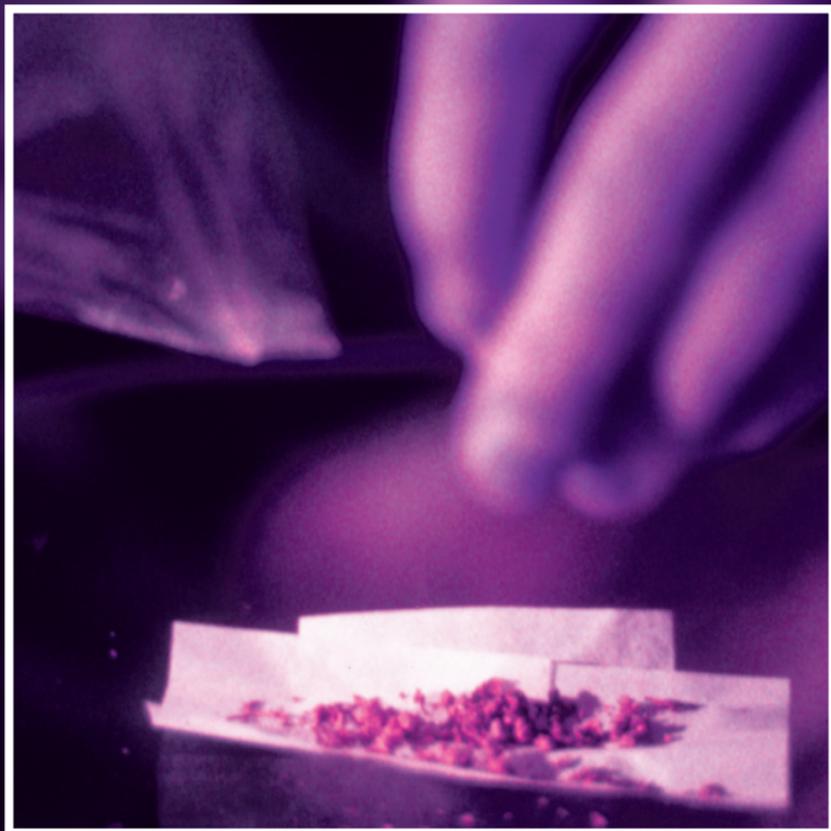
SECOND EDITION

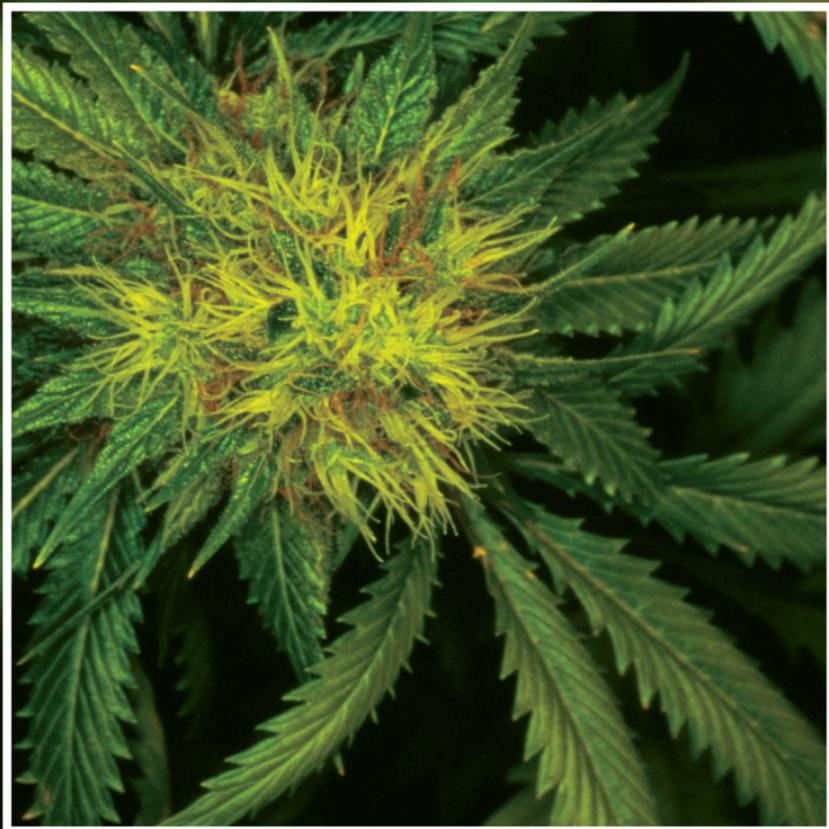


## **What?**

Cannabis is a bushy green plant whose sap and leaves contain the psychoactive compound delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). It grows in moist, temperate climates.







It is true that most people who become dependent on drugs such as heroin or cocaine report that the first illicit drug they used was cannabis. However, this is because it is the most commonly available illicit drug – **there is no evidence that smoking cannabis, in itself, leads people into taking other drugs.**

**Although heavy use may be linked with lethargy and poor memory, there is no scientific evidence that this is caused by cannabis.**

However, the belief of many cannabis users that it is a harmless drug is false. Because it is often smoked with tobacco, inhaled deeply and held in the lungs, **the lung cancer risks are at least as high as smoking tobacco.**

Sometimes cannabis induces or exaggerates feelings of paranoia and persecution. Unfortunately, because most users expect cannabis to relax them, they often try to stop these feelings by smoking more. So, although it may not cause mental health problems it can make them worse.







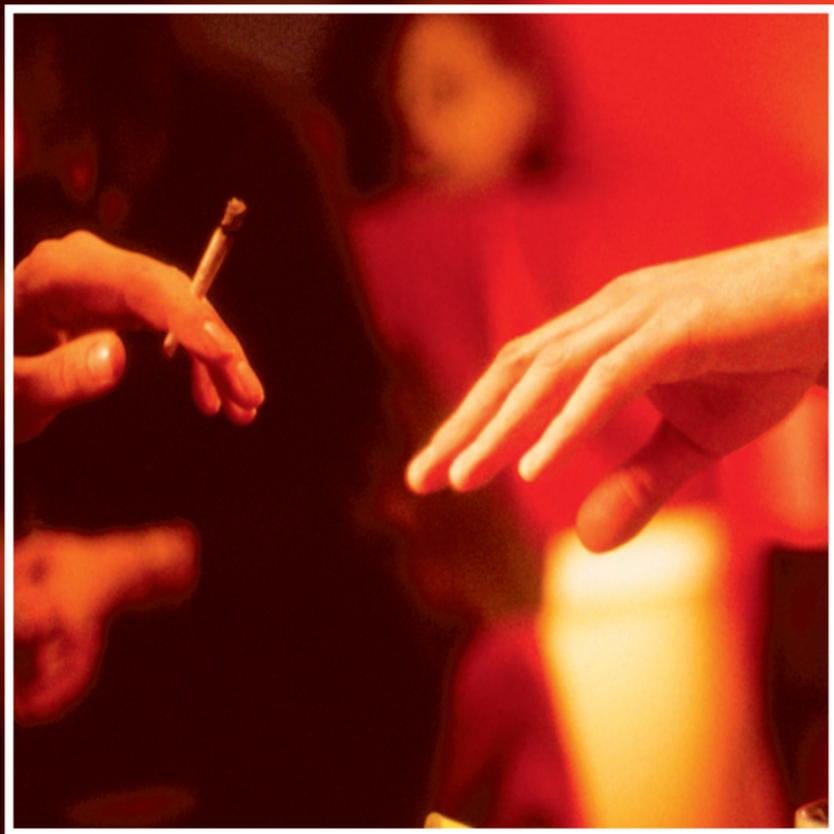
Experiences of cannabis can vary: the alteration in perception may be subtle (some first-time users report no effects at all) or very powerful, with a sensation of unstoppable waves of intoxication, a strong sense of colours and sounds being different and even (rarely) hallucinations.

A person's decision to smoke cannabis is influenced by a number of factors to do with: **society** – the fact that the drug is easily obtained, the number of people using it, the attitudes of the person's peer group to the drug etc; **the drug** – the physical and psychological effects of the drug on the individual (see above) and **the person** – their psychological make-up, history, mood, emotional state, expectations of the drug etc.

Trying to understand these different factors is probably more helpful than trying to fit people to theories which say that those who take drugs are 'victims of peer pressure' or different because 'they have an addictive personality.'

Cannabis is not a drug that is physically addictive – even people smoking large amounts on a daily basis can stop suddenly with no physical withdrawal syndrome. However, people using at these – or lower – levels may feel that they need to smoke in order to cope with everyday situations. If cannabis becomes part of a way of coping then the risk of psychological dependence, and of moving on to problematic use of other drugs, is higher.







**01 Smoking a joint**

Photo: David Hoffman Photo Library



**02 Cannabis being grown indoors, under lights, in the UK**

Photo: David Hoffman Photo Library



**03 Rolling a joint using dried cannabis leaves ('grass')**

Photo: Jamie Baker/Demon Imaging



**04 Flowering heads of the female cannabis plant**

Photo: David Hoffman Photo Library



**05 A field of cannabis plants**

Photo: David Hoffman Photo Library



**06 'Inspecting the crop'**

Photo: David Hoffman Photo Library



**07 Passing a joint**

Photo: Jamie Baker/Demon Imaging

Written by **Andrew Preston**

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Exchange Supplies is an independent social enterprise producing information and resources to reduce drug-related harm. For more information go to: [www.exchangesupplies.org](http://www.exchangesupplies.org)

The What & Why? series covers cannabis, amphetamine, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin, methadone and harm reduction.

All titles in the series are available direct from: **Exchange Supplies**, tel: 01305 262244.

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Exchange Supplies, 1 Great Western Industrial Centre, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1RD.

Tel: 01305 262244 Fax: 01305 262255 Email: [info@exchangesupplies.org](mailto:info@exchangesupplies.org)

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What & Why? is a series of booklets for anyone who wants to understand illicit drug use.

Illustrated with stunning photography, What & Why? explains what drugs are (how they are made, sold and used), their effects and why people choose to take them.

Essential reading for anyone confronted with illicit drug use at home or at work.

What & Why? is written mainly for professionals, parents and the relatives and friends of drug users. The booklets may also provide a useful contribution to secondary school discussion about drugs.



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