

CANNABIS AND THE WORKPLACE

Cannabis is a legal psychoactive substance in Canada, just like alcohol, tobacco and caffeine. A recent national study revealed 17.5% of Canadians aged 15 and older used cannabis at least once in the last three months. A few of us—about 6%—use cannabis most days. Some of us use cannabis at work.

“Cannabis use” and “work” may seem like polar opposites, depending on your understanding and experience with cannabis. You may be asking yourself, “How can a person get anything done if they’re high?” or “What if the job involves driving, operating heavy equipment, taking care of children or anything requiring concentration and responsibility?” These are valid questions.

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MYTH #1



Cannabis leads to laziness and lack of productivity

Many people who use cannabis have full-time jobs and families. It’s true that young people who use cannabis may be more likely to drop out of school. But the choice to leave isn’t about cannabis. The reasons are usually much deeper. Cannabis use is more likely a way of coping with those reasons.



MYTH #2

Cannabis is a medicine, so it doesn't cause harm

Cannabis is similar to other drugs, including prescription medicines, in that it can be both helpful and harmful. (Consider the the list of side effects that come with some prescription medications.)

Cannabis has been shown to be useful in moderating pain, reducing nausea and promoting appetite for people with certain medical conditions, such as cancer. For people struggling with PTSD or other challenging experiences, cannabis can offer a “time away” from memories and may provide a rest from the pain of everyday life. On the other hand, heavy, long-term cannabis use can cause health and social problems.

The benefits and harms of using cannabis are complex and must be weighed for each person in each situation. Generally speaking, the risk of harms increases with the more we use and the more often we use.

“I use cannabis when I'm painting or doing tasks that are repetitive and boring. But when I'm doing carpentry and have to measure and do a lot of math, or have to use power tools, I don't touch the stuff.”—Tradesperson

The benefits and risks of using cannabis at work

Cannabis has therapeutic qualities that help some people function and keep their job. Without it, they may not be able to work as well, or at all.

Legally, adults may not be impaired by THC while working or operating a vehicle. This is because THC can be a depressant, which means it slows down activity in our central nervous system. This can equate to slower brain function, poor concentration, and confusion.

Being impaired by THC can lead to accidents or death in occupations where concentration is paramount, such as jobs in the medical field, oil and gas industry, or any position that involves driving, operating heavy machinery or working in dangerous situations. These jobs carry a great deal of responsibility that affect not only you, the worker, but also workers and others around you. >>

Since legalization in 2018, many people have concerns about the role of cannabis in the workplace. Some of these concerns are based on myths, others on observation or experience. It's a complex topic but with a better understanding of why people use cannabis and ways to avoid workplace risks, some of the confusion may be cleared away.

Why some people use cannabis while working

Some people use cannabis routinely, throughout the day, for medical or therapeutic reasons. They may have a physical or mental health problem, such as cancer or anxiety, that responds well to THC (a mind-altering compound) or CBD (a therapeutic compound that doesn't affect cognition). These folks may have difficulty functioning without cannabis.

A few people who have been using cannabis for a long time may continue to use as it offers some benefit, perhaps a sense of calmness, useful in some work settings. These people may not experience much of a high.

Some people who use cannabis claim that THC helps them cope with stress or the boredom of routine tasks at work, provided there are no safety concerns. For them, cannabis offers a lift in spirit or change of perspective needed to do a job well.

There are personal and social costs too. Losing your license can affect your self-esteem and confidence, your reputation among family and friends, and your job (if your job involves driving or you need to drive to get to work). An impaired driving charge can stay on your driving record for a long time.

For more information about cannabis and the law, see [Get Cannabis Clarity](#).

MYTH #3



Cannabis is not like alcohol so you can use cannabis and drive

Our ability to think clearly, concentrate and react—so important to driving—is altered while under the influence of THC. Therefore, combining cannabis use with driving or other activities that require attention is a serious concern. Combining cannabis and alcohol leads to even further impairment and increase in risks for harms, including potential for crashes or other accidents.

What employers can do

Make well-being the focus

Working is one of the things in life that makes us feel good about ourselves. It provides us with the means to support our families and ourselves. Creating a healthy workplace involves everyone. It requires us to acknowledge others' perspectives and experiences, and build shared values. Evidence suggests that when an employer's values and decisions align with staff well-being, workers are more motivated to strive to do their best, benefiting both the organization and the employees. A supportive culture, and open communication among people, is the foundation of a healthy workplace. Organizational values of diversity, fairness, respect, and trust will be reflected in workplace culture as will helpful or unhelpful ways people communicate with each other. Cannabis legalization is an opportunity to reflect on workplace culture and build an inclusive and respectful workplace.

Most people know that being impaired at work is not a good idea. There are some people who use cannabis, however, who may not be impaired by it or may not feel their impairment impacts others. It will be important to engage with staff around how cannabis use in the workplace may affect co-workers and customers/clients. This includes discussing perceptions of safety and productivity.

Things to consider:

- What does a healthy workplace look and feel like?
- How can we support health and wellness in our workplace?



Tips on creating a positive workplace culture:

- Engage with employees and co-workers regularly
- Solve issues together
- Be transparent
- Nurture opportunities for collaboration

For more information, see WorkSafeBC [Enhancing health & safety culture & performance](#).

Promote dialogue

Dialogue is a conversation in which participants seek to understand each other. While talking is a part of the conversation, listening and asking good questions are more important. The goal is not to come away having convinced someone about something, but to have gained understanding of another's perspective. Dialogue seeks wholeness not oneness.

Opening dialogue with all stakeholders in the workplace—employers, supervisors, staff—can help to create a broad understanding of the views within the organization. This understanding provides a critical foundation from which to develop shared approaches that respect everyone. Dialogue also helps participants develop skills for the civil exchange of ideas needed in democratic communities. In dialogue, we discover new ideas that allow



“Over time I learned that some of my staff used cannabis, for a whole variety of reasons. As long as they were productive and able to perform their duties, it didn’t matter to me. If not, well, then we’d have a conversation. Fortunately, I never had to let anyone go because of their cannabis use.”

—Former restaurant manager

us to evolve our thinking and become lifelong learners. We also increase capacity to build stronger teams.

Dialogue is an especially important tool, in the workplace and elsewhere, as we enter an era of legalized cannabis. People have different perspectives on cannabis. While people in

the workplace do not need to think and believe alike, they do need to work together in harmony.

Here are some questions your workplace may wish to consider:

1. How does the physical design of our workplace create spaces for or encourage spontaneous dialogue?
2. What is our workplace culture (norms of attitude and behaviour)? Do these norms help or hinder our work? Is there anything we might do to improve our workplace culture?

For dialogue resources, see [Let’s Talk Cannabis](#).

What we can do

Each of us has some degree of choice at work and beyond. We have the ability to decide whether it makes sense or not to use cannabis (or other drugs) while working or in other situations of responsibility. Sometimes, though, it can help to have some guidance around safer use of substances. Here’s a quick summary of safer cannabis use practices. >>

SAFER CANNABIS USE



Some people will choose to use cannabis. For those considering using cannabis, here are some things to think about and ways to reduce harm.

BEFORE YOU USE CANNABIS, ASK YOURSELF ...

- **Do I really want to use it?** Sometimes cannabis helps. Sometimes it makes things worse.
- **Can I trust my source?** Legal cannabis sources are tested for quality while street cannabis is not.
- **How much THC is in it?** THC or delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol is the most well-known cannabinoid that causes impairment. Too much THC can also cause other unwanted effects (e.g., anxiety, paranoia).
- **How much CBD is in it?** Cannabidiol or CBD is another cannabinoid. Unlike THC, CBD does not cause impairment. There is some evidence that CBD may block or lower some of the effects of THC and may contribute to the health benefits associated with cannabis use.

IT'S SAFER TO ...

- **Avoid using too much too often**, especially if you're young. Human brains are not fully developed until early adulthood. Regular use (daily or almost daily) over time can lead to dependence. You may start needing it just to feel normal.
- **Wait at least six hours** before driving or operating machinery.
- **Avoid smoking.** Vaping or edibles are better options because they are not as harmful to your lungs. If you do smoke, don't hold in the smoke. 95% of the THC is absorbed immediately.
- **Go slowly** when eating or drinking cannabis. You can get higher than expected. Try a little and wait an hour before using more. Same advice when trying a new type of cannabis – go slowly.

- **Avoid mixing substances.** Adding tobacco to a joint means adding a drug with cancer causing toxins. Drinking alcohol while using cannabis intensifies the effects, including impairment, and makes them last longer than expected.
- **Skip cannabis** if you (or a member of your family) have a history of psychosis. Cannabis use increases the risk that symptoms of this condition will reappear or get worse. If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, it's safest to avoid using cannabis.

FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

- [Safer Cannabis Use](#)
- [Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines](#)

Resources for employers:

- [Workplace impairment: A primer on preparing for cannabis legalization](#)
- [Workplace Strategies: Risk of Impairment from Cannabis](#)
- [Construction Industry of British Columbia Substance Abuse Testing & Treatment Program Policy](#)
- [Cannabis Legalization: A Guide for Workplaces](#)

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