

How dependence develops

Person, substance, setting. Experts describe addiction in terms of three sides that interact: the person, with the way they deal with feelings and problems; the substance, with its effect and availability; and the setting of family, friends, school and work. No single side explains a dependence on its own.

What happens in the brain. THC acts on the reward system. If this happens often, the brain becomes less sensitive, and the same effect takes more (tolerance). After the high, restlessness and irritability can follow. Over time, people often use to get rid of this discomfort. Anyone who uses cannabis to dampen anxiety, anger or sadness is at higher risk.

Risk factors. Frequency of use (the strongest single factor), starting early, especially before 16, a lot of THC, tobacco at the same time, psychological stress, lack of support, drastic life events, a circle of friends in which almost everyone uses. Risk factors describe probabilities, not a prediction.

What protects. Confidence, the feeling of being able to make a difference, being able to tackle problems, stable relationships and a role in training or work.

How experts classify it. According to the DSM-5, a cannabis use disorder is present if at least two of eleven criteria apply within twelve months: two to three count as mild, four to five as moderate, six or more as severe. The stages range from occasional use through risky use and harmful use to dependence; the transitions are fluid.

Withdrawal. Almost one in two people who use regularly know withdrawal symptoms: nervousness, sleep problems, little appetite, irritability, anxiety or low mood. They usually start one to three days after the last use and are strongest in the first week. Most subside after two to three weeks; sleep problems and low mood can last longer.

Key points

- Risky: look closely, take the self-test, have an honest conversation.
- Harmful: get advice, for example at an addiction counselling service.
- Dependent: treatment, meaning counselling, withdrawal and therapy.

Sources: Federal Ministry of Health (2024), model curriculum for prevention officers; drugcom.de (BIÖG), What are psychosocial risk factors for cannabis dependence?; Bonnet, Preuss (2017), The cannabis withdrawal syndrome: current insights, Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation 8.

More detail: csc.do/en/prevention/knowledge/how-dependence-develops/ ·
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