

# Getting through cannabis withdrawal

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If you use cannabis regularly, you may get withdrawal symptoms when you cut down or stop suddenly. Knowing what to expect will help you plan ways to get through withdrawal and reach your goals around cannabis use.

## What causes cannabis withdrawal?

Using cannabis floods receptors that are found in the body and brain. Some of these receptors are linked to feeling pleasure. Others help to regulate sleep, appetite and other functions. When you start to use cannabis regularly, your brain makes adjustments by lowering the number of cannabinoid receptors. This change reduces the effect of the cannabis, and you may need to use more cannabis to achieve the same effect. If you then reduce your cannabis use or stop suddenly, you may experience unpleasant symptoms. For example, it may be harder to feel pleasure in day-to-day activities and you may have trouble sleeping. These are signs of cannabis withdrawal.

The good news is that cannabis withdrawal is temporary. Over time, your brain will again adapt to the change in cannabis use. You may start to feel pleasure again in the same way you did before you began to use cannabis regularly. Appetite and sleep will also return to how they were before.

## What are common symptoms of cannabis withdrawal?

Withdrawal symptoms can vary from one person to the next. One tip for considering what to expect is to look at what withdrawal has looked like for you in the past—it will likely be similar unless you have increased your use or the strength of your cannabis.

Common signs and symptoms of cannabis withdrawal include:

- irritability
- depressed mood
- decreased appetite, weight loss
- abdominal pain, nausea, diarrhea
- restlessness
- sweating (peaks at 4–7 days)
- difficulty sleeping
- urges/cravings to use cannabis.

## How long does cannabis withdrawal last?

Cannabis withdrawal can be very uncomfortable, but it will slowly get better. Symptoms typically start one or two days after stopping or cutting down. They peak around two to six days and last up to two weeks, but symptoms can last up to three weeks for people with heavy cannabis use. You can always check in with your doctor if you want more support.

## Is it better to slowly cut down or to quit cold turkey?

The decision to stop abruptly (cold turkey) or to reduce over time is a personal one. For some people, the deciding factor is whether they want to go through withdrawal all at once over a shorter time, or whether they prefer less intense symptoms but over a longer time. If you think you won't be able to cope with mood or sleep problems during withdrawal, then reducing your use slowly might be a better option.

You can do this by using less cannabis or reducing the potency of the cannabis you use. You can also think about what has or hasn't worked for you in the past. If your goal was to cut down but it didn't work, or if your goal was to stop abruptly but that didn't work, you may want to try the opposite approach.

## How can I prepare for cannabis withdrawal?

Coming off cannabis can be a physically and emotionally challenging time, but there are things you can do to help you succeed. If your goal is to reduce cannabis use instead of quitting completely, decide how quickly you want to reduce, and develop a plan for reaching that goal. An important tip for reducing is to delay the first high of the day.

Here are things you can do to help you change your cannabis use—whether you want to reduce your use or quit completely:

- **Decide on your cannabis use goal.** Do you want to reduce your cannabis use and stay at that lower use or do you want to stop using completely?
- **Choose a quit date.** If your goal is to stop using cannabis abruptly, decide on the day you will stop. If your goal is to reduce your use, choose the date you will start cutting down and the date by which you will have achieved the reduced amount you are aiming for.
- **Create a support plan.** Do you need to take time off work or school? Do you need to make sure you have not planned stressful activities? Who do you want to tell so you can get extra support? You can ask for supportive phone calls, texts or visits, or invite friends to join you in healthy social activities such as going for coffee or a walk.
- **Remove cannabis from your home.** Seeing cannabis or cannabis paraphernalia might trigger you to want to use, so get rid of these things to help you control urges and cravings.
- **Create plans and distractions.** Build some structure and routine into the withdrawal period. Schedule in exercise or get outside into green space every day. Make sure you rest, eat, drink fluids and pamper yourself. Plan rewarding activities—a special meal or your favourite shows.
- **Soothe yourself.** Make time for pleasant activities to help you through tough moments—listen to music or take a warm bath.
- **Be aware of your triggers.** Think about things that might give you cravings to use cannabis and try to avoid them. These triggers can be people, places or things.

- **Get support for sleep.** Sleep problems are the reason some people abandon their quit attempt. If insomnia is a problem, you can ask your doctor for a short-term sleep aid to get you through the withdrawal period. An over-the-counter product such as melatonin can also help.

## Will cannabis withdrawal affect my mood?

Low mood is a very common withdrawal symptom. You might think that the way you feel after a few days without cannabis is your “baseline” mood (how you usually feel), but actually it takes a week or two, or even longer, for your mood to return to its baseline. This is important to know because understanding how cannabis affects your mood can be confusing. The negative feelings that come with cannabis withdrawal can feel like depression. Using cannabis again relieves those feelings, so you might think that the cannabis is helping your mood. But what is actually happening is that using cannabis again made your withdrawal symptoms go away. If you want to know what your baseline mood really is, wait it out for a few weeks.

## When should I seek help during withdrawal?

If your mood gets very low or if you have thoughts of taking your life, get help right away. Having thoughts about suicide is a medical emergency. You can go to any hospital emergency department, call your family doctor or reach out to a crisis hotline.

Withdrawing from cannabis can be unpleasant, but remember that what you are going through will pass. Your thinking may become clearer. You may also notice that you feel more confident about being able to stay away from cannabis. Making life changes is challenging, but with the right support, you can do it.

## Resources

Support for cannabis withdrawal and quitting: [www.weedless.org](http://www.weedless.org)

Support for sleep difficulties: [www.mysleepwell.ca](http://www.mysleepwell.ca)