

# 420 SHARE What's the deal with cannabis in Hong Kong?

As the police force steps up efforts to crack down on cannabis use, City Weekend examines Hong Kong's evolving relationship with the drug

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**Rachel Blundy**

## What is the law on cannabis in Hong Kong?

The use or sale of cannabis is banned in Hong Kong under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance, which came into effect in 1969. If a police officer catches someone with a substance they suspect is cannabis, they may send the sample off for testing by a government chemist before charging the individual. But with larger amounts of the substance, a suspect may be brought before the courts while a sample is being tested.

Manufacturing cannabis or any other drug included in the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance is deemed the most serious of all drug-related offences, while trafficking the drug to Hong Kong can also result in a prison sentence.

Any person who cultivates any plant of the genus cannabis faces a HK\$100,000 fine and 15 years in prison. There is little pressure for the law to change, unlike countries such as Australia, where there have been moves to legalise cannabis for medicinal use.

Laurence Pak, founder of campaign group Legalise Medical Marijuana in Hong Kong, said there was strong scientific evidence to support the medicinal use of cannabis.

“We would like to see a society where a government goes after criminals who bring harm to others, such as those who commit murders, manslaughter, theft and other similar crimes,” he said. “It is time for Hong Kong to not stay behind.”

He went on to highlight the recent case of a Hong Kong woman who faced court action for selling a cardboard box. The case was eventually dropped after it sparked public outrage.

“We also ask the government to review its role. When they send their agents to arrest grannies who are making a living by collecting cardboard boxes, are they protecting the people from harm?” Pak asked.

In 1994, two top High Court judges said cannabis should be decriminalised because [the law was doing little to stem drug use](#).

High Court judge Mr Justice Kaplan and Appeal Court judge Mr Justice Godfrey spoke in favour of decriminalisation in interviews with the *Post* despite concerns about the growing use of the drug among expats and increasingly locals.



## Police action on cannabis

Police seizures of cannabis have recently been rising. Officers have been specifically targeting those manufacturing cannabis.

On May 16, [police made their biggest seizure of cannabis plants](#) since at least 1990 during raids on two factory units that were turned into indoor marijuana farms.

Police figures show cannabis seizures in the city increased by 96.2 per cent to 255kg last year from 130kg in 2015. Local law enforcers seized 99kg of cannabis in 2014 and 85kg in 2013.

Senior Superintendent Yip Wan-lung has attributed the increase in the number of cannabis cultivation cases this year to enhanced police enforcement action.

The force does not keep a record of how many people are arrested, charged or convicted for cannabis-related offences.

However, the number of convictions for serious drug offences in Hong Kong has been steadily falling since 2008, when there were 2,966 offences. By last year, the total was just 1,712 – a record low for Hong Kong.

On Monday, the world marked International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

### **Watch: Hopes raised as Australia legalises medical cannabis**

### **How common is cannabis in Hong Kong?**

Drug charities have challenged statistics which suggest the number of drug users in Hong Kong is steadily declining, as well as criticised the government for greatly underestimating the number of users, recorded as 8,926 in 2015. Dr Vanessa Wong Ting-chi, a psychiatrist specialising in substance abuse, [described the official data as “a joke” only representing “a numbers game”](#).

Figures from the Census and Statistics Department suggest there was a 3 per cent decline in the number of cannabis users in the city between 2014 and 2015, from 353 users to 343 users.

Despite this, drug campaigners suggest the problem is much more prevalent, particularly among young people.

They also suggest cannabis is extremely easy to obtain in the city, either through online purchases or on the street.

Sky Siu, director of non-profit group KELY Support, said government statistics suggesting an increase in the number of young cannabis users were worrying.

She said the increase from 11.9 per cent to 26.9 per cent in the first quarter of the year was partly reflective of how cannabis had become “normalised” among young people.

“People have said it is the lesser of two evils when you compare it with alcohol,” she said. “This reflects how young people are feeling. I think it is actually more useful to look at alcohol alone and not compare it with another substance. We focus on asking young people where they are getting their information about cannabis and questioning the legitimacy.”

### Medical benefits of cannabinoids

- TETRAHYDROCANNABINOL**: Relieves pain, Boosts relaxation, Slows inflammation
- CANNABICHRIMENE**: Encourages cell growth, Stops fungus growth
- CANNABIDOL**: Reduces risk of nerve damage, Boosts appetite
- TETRAHYDROCANNABIVARIN**: Stops bacteria growth, Boosts cell growth
- CANNABIGEROL**: Stimulates bone growth
- CANNABINOL**: Aids sleep, Fights free radicals in the blood stream, Relaxes muscles

### What possession gets you in Hong Kong

Weight Possessed	Sentencing Range
Over 500g	4 - 8 months
Over 1kg	8 - 16 months
Over 3kg	24 - 36 months
Over 6kg	36 - 48 months

### Effects of cannabis on the brain

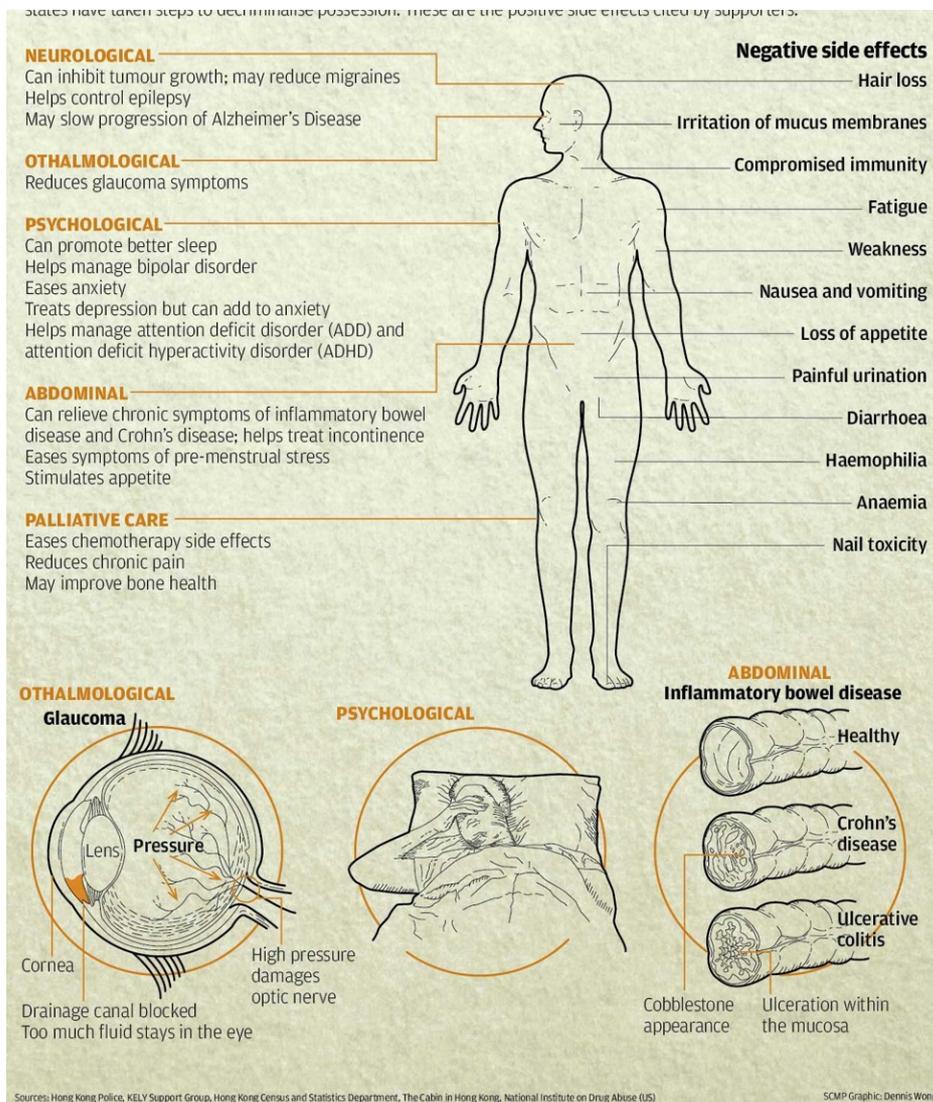
- Hypothalamus**: Increases appetite and can lead to weight gain
- Cerebellum**: Impairs coordination and muscle control
- Cerebral cortex**: Can impair thought process and short-term memory
- Amygdala**: Emotions can become relaxed or increased under the influence of cannabis
- Hippocampus**: Impairs memory storage and ability to recall
- Brain stem**: Can help relieve nausea, pain and high blood pressure

### Status of cannabis in the United States

The US states of Nevada, Maine, Colorado, Washington, California, Massachusetts, Alaska, and Oregon have legalised the sale and possession of marijuana for medical and recreational use. Washington DC has legalised personal use but not commercial sale. Twenty-three states and the District of Columbia have passed laws to allow specific medical use, and 14 states have taken steps to decriminalise possession. These are the positive side effects cited by supporters.

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## What effects does cannabis have on users?

Common side effects of using cannabis include red eyes, dilated pupils, laughing easily, feeling relaxed, reduced concentration, confusion, loss of interest in hobbies, school or work, increased appetite or weight gain, distorted perception, poor memory and coordination, slowed reactions, rapid heartbeat, frequent anxiety, memory loss, depression and a weaker immune system.

Although smoking cannabis has been considered by some as less addictive than harder drugs such as cocaine, there is still a general consensus among scientists that cannabis users can become dependent on the drug if they use it over a prolonged period.

Dr Seamus MacAuley, a drugs counsellor at private drugs rehabilitation centre The Cabin, based in Central, said it

was “not a given” that someone who took cannabis would move on to harder drugs such as cocaine.

“I think there are people who just use it recreationally,” he said. “However if I look at all of the hard drug users who have crossed my path, they will have smoked cannabis at some point.”

Dr MacAuley added that most of the clients he treats for cannabis addiction are school or university students.

“Unless you are using it regularly and getting addicted, you will not get withdrawal symptoms from cannabis,” he said.

### **Cannabis sentencing guidelines**

Over 500 gms: 4 to 8 months

Over 1,000 gms: 8 to 16 months

Over 2,000 gms: 16 to 24 months

Over 3,000 gms: 24 to 36 months

Over 6,000 gms: 36 to 48 months

Over 9,000 gms: 4 years plus

*Sources: Hong Kong Police; KELY Support Group; Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department; The Cabin in Hong Kong; National Institute on Drug Abuse in the US; and HKU study ‘The Hong Kong Drug Market’ (2000) by Karen A. Joe Laidler with David Hodson and Harold Traver*