



# Cannabis and Women's Health



**Sex, Gender & Cannabis Hub**

This resource combines 3 info sheets.  
They can be downloaded individually at:  
[www.sexgendercannabishub.ca](http://www.sexgendercannabishub.ca)



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# Why women use cannabis

- Women use cannabis for many reasons. The information included on this sheet is based on literature about women's use of cannabis published between 2018 – 2022. Research methods and other materials are posted on the [Sex, Gender and Cannabis Hub](#).

1

## Women may use cannabis to manage pain

Women experience more chronic pain and are more sensitive to pain, compared to men. Some women find cannabis to be the most effective in managing pain and inflammation, improving sleep, and reducing nausea, vomiting, and cancer-related symptoms. For others, cannabis may help with multiple conditions including migraines, endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome, epilepsy, and headaches.

4

## Women may use cannabis instead of medications

Some women perceive cannabis as safer and having fewer side effects than prescription medications. Some report discontinuing medications such as opioids and narcotics, anti-depressants, and benzodiazepines in managing pain and other health conditions.

2

## Women may use cannabis to cope

Some women may use cannabis as a way to relax and address challenges in their life, including day-to-day stress, depression, anxiety, adverse life events, or trauma and violence.



3

## Women may use cannabis to relax and socialize

Some women are introduced to cannabis by partners, family, or friends and use cannabis as a way to socialize, relax and have fun.

6

## Women may use cannabis to manage pregnancy-related symptoms

Women want more information about the potential harms associated with perinatal cannabis use. Though research is limited on the benefits and harms associated with perinatal cannabis use, many women believe that cannabis is safer than other medications used to manage nausea, depression, or anxiety in pregnancy.

5

## Women may use cannabis to enhance sexual pleasure

Some women use cannabis to decrease inhibitions, improve sexual function, increase satisfaction and desire, and to feel comfortable, at ease, and close with their sexual partners.



# Reducing Harms

**Whatever the reason for use, there are ways to reduce harms of cannabis.**

- » use smaller amounts and/or use cannabis less frequently
- » use cannabis with a lower amount of THC
- » use safest methods of consuming cannabis
- » avoid synthetic cannabis products (such as K2 and Spice) as they are often stronger and more dangerous than natural cannabis products

***To learn more about different ways women consume cannabis, and alternatives to using cannabis to cope with stress, see our other information sheets on the [Sex, Gender and Cannabis Hub](#).***



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# The ways women use cannabis

**i**  
The green circles indicate the % of girls and women who use this method, from the Canadian Cannabis Survey 2021



**70%**  
smoke (e.g., a joint, bong, pipe, blunt)

## Smoking

- » Smoking cannabis can be harmful to the respiratory system and can negatively affect lung and heart health.
- » Females who are dependent on cannabis are more likely than males to experience withdrawal symptoms (i.e., feel nauseous, nervous, restless, sweaty).
- » Smoking cannabis when pregnant may increase risk of lower birth weight in newborns.



**8%**  
use a non-portable vaporizer

**27%**  
use a vape pen or e-cigarette

## Vaping

- » Vaping has been linked to stronger 'highs', anxiety and nervousness, restlessness, and heart racing in females, compared to males.
- » Females have reported significantly higher rates of dry mouth and irritated throat when using vaporized CBD, compared to males.



**58%**  
use edibles (e.g., brownies, cakes, cookies or candy)

## Edibles

- » Edibles can take longer to have an effect compared to vaping or smoking, which can result in a longer and more intense high than expected.
- » Women are more likely to use edibles for managing pain, compared to men.
- » Teenage girls who have not used cannabis yet have reported they would be more interested in using edibles over vaping, compared to teenage boys.



**23%**  
use cannabis oil for oral use (e.g., in a dropper/syringe, softgel/capsules, spray bottle)

## Oils and Tinctures

- » Vaping oils may contain harmful additives compared to dried cannabis flower.
- » When oils are heated in a vaping

device they pose a risk of burns as well as heart and lung issues compared to cannabis oils or tinctures from a dropper.

- » Consuming cannabis oil in food can delay the 'high' compared to taking it under the tongue, where it enters more quickly through the bloodstream.
- » Using oil on the skin is a less

direct route for cannabis to enter the body, and may create fewer health risks.

- » Women with endometriosis have reported hemp/CBD oil as one of the most effective strategies for pain management.





15%

consume cannabis-infused drinks (e.g., sparkling water, tea, dissolvable powder)



11%

apply cannabis to skin (e.g., salves, creams, topicals)

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- » How do you use cannabis (smoking, vaping, edibles...)? What are the benefits and harms you experience?
- » After learning about the different methods of using cannabis listed here, will you make any changes in your use?



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## Drinks

- » Like edibles, it can take longer to feel the 'high' effects of cannabis in drinks, which can make it easy to take more than recommended or desired.
- » Females may feel greater effects at lower doses because of factors like metabolism, so monitoring pace and dose i.e., 'start low and go slow' is important for managing intake.

## Creams

- » Skin creams have lower levels of cannabis and are a less direct route for cannabis to enter the body, so overall risks are low compared to other forms of use. But there is little research on this way of consuming cannabis.
- » People with arthritis report using creams, and women have used cannabis creams for managing reproductive health-related pain, but effectiveness is mixed.

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# Some alternatives to using cannabis to cope with stress

- Women often report using cannabis as a way to cope with stress, depression, anxiety, adverse life events, or trauma and violence.

Here are some alternatives to cope with trauma and other stressors, and to stay healthy and resilient.

## 1 Grounding skills

Grounding exercises are practical activities that help you relax, stay present or re-connect with what is happening around you. Grounding skills can be used as a coping skill or as part of a safety plan when you are feeling overwhelmed or triggered. Here are some examples of grounding exercises:

- » **Breathe** in to a count of four. Pause your breath for a count of four. Breathe out to a count of four. Pause your breath for a count of four. Repeat several times.
- » **Carry a grounding object** such as a stone in your pocket. Touch it for comfort when you need to.
- » **Visualize** your fear dissolving like a melting ice cube.
- » **Talk yourself through** what you are experiencing. *"My heart is pounding". "These feelings will pass". "I will get through this".*

For more examples of grounding activities see:

- » [Grounding Activities and Trauma-Informed Practice](#) Centre of Excellence for Women's Health
- » Chapter 18 in [Finding your Best Self](#) by Lisa M Najavits gives examples of mental grounding, physical grounding, and soothing grounding, and encourages you to find which methods you like best.

## 2 Mindfulness Practice

Instead of numbing or escaping feelings as people often try to do by using cannabis and/or other substances, mindfulness practice encourages you to pay attention to your feelings. Mindfulness is about looking at thoughts and emotions with kindness and compassion for yourself. You can bring awareness to feelings and sensations in the body, observing them as they come and go. Being curious about yourself and recognizing the impermanence of feelings and thoughts can be very empowering. There are many apps, videos and books that can guide you in practicing mindfulness.

Examples of books about women and mindfulness:

- » [The Mindful Woman: Gentle Practices for Restoring Calm, Finding Balance, and Opening Your Heart](#) Sue Patton Thoele
- » [Real Change: Mindfulness to Heal Ourselves and the World](#) Sharon Salzberg
- » [Moment-by-Moment in Women's Recovery: A Mindfulness-Based Approach to Relapse Prevention](#) Hortensia Amara and Zayda Vallejo

### 3 Walking

Walking can help improve mental and physical health. Walking in nature can be especially helpful for decompressing, clearing your mind and focusing your intention. Walking can also be a social activity, a way to connect with [culture and the land](#), or to [“find your inner warrior”](#).

### 4 Recognizing social pain, avoiding dependence

It is very common for experiences of trauma to be connected to isolation, injustice, gaslighting, coercion, racism and sexism. It is important to recognize these experiences of social pain and not expect substances to cure them. When cannabis or other substances are used “to cope” it may increase your vulnerability to addiction.



All the activities captured on this sheet can help with social pain. Naming your trauma and discrimination and finding personal, healthy, positive activities are important. Some resources that may inspire:

- » [Finding your Best Self: Recovery from Addiction, Trauma or Both](#) Lisa M Najavits
- » [Empowering Girls](#), a program offered by the Canadian Women’s Foundation
- » [Powering Up: Trauma-Informed Leadership, From Self to Community](#), a workbook by YWCA Toronto, United Way Greater Toronto & Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health



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