Cannabis edibles

DARTA Drug and Alcohol **Research and Training** Australia

Cannabis can be smoked, eaten or vaporised. When cannabis is eaten the effect will last for longer and is often reported to be more intense, however it will take far longer for the drug to take effect.

People who choose to eat the drug usually do so to avoid the negative health effects associated with smoking, however, the risks of other potential harms are not reduced. Cannabis in various forms can be added to various foods and these products are generally called 'edibles'.

In the past edibles were likely to be homemade, with the most popular of these being brownies. In recent times, as cannabis is increasingly being used for medicinal purposes, as well as now being legally available in some parts of the world, edibles are far more likely to be produced commercially. Unfortunately, the edibles industry is not well regulated and studies have found that claims made on the labelling of these products and associated marketing about the ingredients or packaging are not always accurate.

What is a cannabis edible?

Cannabis is derived from the plant *cannabis sativa* and comes in four main forms– dried plant leaves and buds (marijuana), resin (hashish or hash), oil (hash oil) and now highly purified extracts of the active chemical tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) (waxes and crystals). These different forms can be smoked, eaten or vaporised.

A cannabis edible is a food product that contains THC or one or more of its active compounds (known as cannabinoids). Although the term edible can refer to a food or drink, a cannabis-infused drink is more likely to be called a 'liquid edible' or a 'drinkable'.

In the past edibles were more likely to be homemade. The most popular of these were brownies (often referred to as 'hash brownies' or 'spacecakes'). These are made by infusing butter or oil with cannabis (canna-butter or canna-oil) and then adding this in place of regular butter to the recipe.

Since the legalisation of cannabis took place in some US states and Canada in particular, edibles are typically mass produced and commercially available. These products can be purchased at cannabis dispensaries (where the drug has been legalised either for recreational or medicinal purposes) or online.

Are all edibles the same?

Edibles come in many different forms, with products such as chocolate, lollies, cookies, energy drinks and spreads now available. The cannabis edibles industry has grown significantly in recent years and the range of products keeps on growing. One of the most popular edibles products are gummy bears.

Regardless of what product is used, there are two main types of cannabis edibles:

- THC edibles (THC is the major psychoactive component of cannabis, i.e., it gets you 'stoned')
- CBD edibles (CBD is a non-intoxicating compound found in cannabis that is most likely to be used for medicinal purposes).

Why do people use THC edibles?

THC edibles are mostly consumed for the purpose of getting 'high'. One of the harms associated with cannabis use is the increased risk of lung damage and respiratory problems linked to smoking the drug. Burning anything creates tar and inhaling it into your lungs is one of the major causes of cancer. Edibles allow a person to experience the effects of cannabis while avoiding those potential harms and can be used without other people being aware of it. The desired effects from eating a THC edible include feelings of relaxation and euphoria, increased sociability and increased appetite.

Cannabis edibles

Why do people use CBD edibles?

CBD edibles are generally infused with CBD hemp oil and do not give the user a 'high'. They are more likely to be used by those who are interested in the medicinal benefits of cannabis. CBD has been found to have a range of beneficial properties including anti-convulsant, anti-spasmodic, anti-psychotic and neuroprotective qualities, making it potentially useful in managing many medical conditions, including seizures and pain.

Are cannabis edibles a new thing?

Consuming cannabis in food and drink has a long history dating back to the 10th century in India, however, the edibles industry grew quickly after Colorado became the first US state to legalise cannabis in 2014.

Due to the risks associated with smoking, those who wished to use the drug, particularly those who wanted to access its medicinal benefits began to look for an alternative route of administration. Cannabis edibles has now become a billion-dollar industry, with research suggesting that in those North American states where the drug is legal, edibles account for at least 10% of all cannabis sales.

What are the negative side effects of edibles?

When cannabis is smoked the effects are almost immediate. As a result, the person using the drug can smoke more, moderate or cease their use depending on the desired effect. Edibles, however, take far longer because food is absorbed into the bloodstream through the liver. When an edible is consumed orally it can take anywhere from 1 to 3 hours to feel the full effects. Because of this delay in onset of effect, users often end up eating more of the product believing that it isn't working. This is more likely to occur in people who are new to the drug and can lead to overconsumption, causing a range of problems including severe anxiety, panic attacks, nausea, and in more extreme cases, delirium or psychosis.

It is important to note that if the person eating an edible has alcohol or medications in their system, their body may metabolise THC differently, causing levels in the bloodstream to increase. This may also lead them to 'green out' or 'white out', terms used to describe a situation where a person feels sick after smoking cannabis. They go pale (turning green or white) and start to sweat, they feel dizzy and nauseous, and may vomit.

There are cases of people becoming very sick after eating high levels of THC and whilst a trip to an emergency department for cannabis is relatively uncommon, if it happens it is often due to someone having eaten it.

Unfortunately, cannabis use, no matter how the drug is used, can be highly problematic for some people. Studies have found that cannabis can negatively impact mental health, most particularly for those who have a family history of conditions such as bipolar and schizophrenia. Cannabis does not simply cause these conditions but it can act like a key and 'unlock' them in those that are susceptible and bring on the first episode or make an episode of psychosis worse.

If cannabis is used medically, doesn't that make it safe?

Just because cannabis is used medicinally does not mean it is harmless or completely safe. Medicinal cannabis is most usually CBD, and is prescribed for certain medical conditions, including epilepsy and cancer. These are sometimes a product which is extracted and quality controlled to include precise levels of cannabinoids, including THC, and is prescribed under the care of a medical practitioner in controlled doses in Australia. It is not the same as consuming unknown amounts of cannabis from uncontrolled sources that are advertised on the internet and social media. Patients in Australia who are legally treated with medical cannabinoids have to be monitored to ensure safety and to minimise the risk of adverse outcomes and medication interactions.

If edibles are being manufactured by companies aren't they going to be safer?

Unfortunately, even though the edibles industry is growing quickly, it is poorly regulated.

As a result, it is often difficult to reliably know how much THC is contained in these products. Studies have found highly variable amounts of THC in products contained in the same packaging. There is also evidence that some companies that produce

Cannabis edibles

edibles use the products as a way to dispose of cannabis that otherwise couldn't be sold, e.g., the plant matter is contamination with pesticides or contains mould.

Can cannabis edibles be detected in a roadside drug test or by drug detection dogs (DDD)?

Whilst edibles do smell different from cannabis in plant form, it is possible that DDDs can detect them, as they can be trained to detect cannabis in any form. This depends on many factors, including the presence and strength of THC in the edible. The police do not supply information on this in order to protect operational procedures, so it is difficult to know for sure.

Whilst it would be unlikely to have a positive roadside test from consuming a cannabis edible (unless it was just swallowed and some THC is still in the mouth), if police requested a blood test, cannabis would certainly be detected in the blood sample regardless of how it was consumed as the tests they conduct are designed to detect THC.

Are cannabis edibles legal?

The legality of cannabis edibles in Australia depends on how much THC is contained in the product. There are a range of 'hemp products' legally available across the country, including CBD supplements, all of which must not contain above an allowed concentration of THC. Any product with a THC level above 0.1% is deemed an illicit substance and is therefore not legal for use, distribution or manufacture across the country.

Cannabis edibles that contain THC are considered the same as any cannabis containing product and are illegal in most states and territories in Australia. The exception is the ACT where it recently became legal to possess a small amount of cannabis (50g) that was homegrown. It is illegal, however, to purchase seeds to grow the plants. So, theoretically, if you were to grow your own cannabis and add it to food in your own home for your own consumption, that would be legal. However, the ACT Government has made it very clear that the new laws would not make it legal to purchase THC edibles online and bring them into the territory.

It is important to note that if police find young people possessing or consuming cannabis in any form, they may receive a caution or be charged.