



## **ALCOHOL AND CANNABIS – THE MIX: NEW FIGURES**

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New figures confirm that alcohol and cannabis continues to be the most popular combination of drug types among school students and across the general population. Over two thirds (68%) of school students who had used cannabis also reported using alcohol on the same occasion. Among adult Australians aged 14 years and over, almost 90% of cannabis users reported using alcohol and cannabis on the same occasion.

These figures are from the Australian Secondary School Students' Use of Over-the-Counter and Illicit Substances in 2005 and the 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey.

Other combinations of drugs which were popular amongst school students were as follows:

- Of those who used amphetamine - 61% had combined with alcohol, 37% with cannabis and 21% with ecstasy
- Of those who used hallucinogens – 53% had combined with alcohol, 34% with cannabis and 18% with either amphetamine or ecstasy
- Of those who used ecstasy – 66% had combined with alcohol and 39% with cannabis

Polydrug use, or using more than one drug, is extremely popular. Excluding tobacco, the most common pattern of polydrug use in Australia is among people who mix cannabis and alcohol.

“There has been increasing community concern about teenage binge drinking but there appears to have been little discussion about the practice of combining alcohol with other drugs,” said Paul Dillon from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of NSW. “People appear to mix drugs under the assumption that this practice will increase the perceived positive benefits of each drug taken.”

“However, the only guarantee with polydrug use is that you increase the risk of something going wrong.”

“Combining alcohol and cannabis is one ‘mix’ that we should be particularly concerned about.”

Some of the potential problems linked to the mix include the following:

- 'Greening out' (similar to overdose, with some people even reporting passing out). In a previous NDARC survey of school-based young people, 12% of the sample reported this as one of the major problems associated with cannabis use. The likelihood of 'greening out' appears to be much greater when cannabis is combined with alcohol
- Effects on driving. Without doubt, the combination of alcohol and cannabis, even at low doses of both, puts drivers, passengers and others at serious risks

"One of the most frequently asked questions I get when I visit schools refers to a saying suggesting there is a difference in the effects that mixing alcohol and cannabis can have, depending on the order that you use them," said Mr Dillon. "In a recent review of the literature that we completed looking at this combination, we investigated if this statement was supported by research."

"Although the effects are not totally predictable, it does seem that you're more likely to have a bad reaction if you drink and then smoke, than if you smoke and then drink."

Research suggests that if there's already alcohol in your blood, then more THC (the active component of cannabis) is absorbed into your blood. As a result the user may get more affected by the drug ('stoned') and possibly increase the risk of 'greening out' or overdosing on cannabis.

Other research suggests that smoking cannabis can actually slow the absorption of alcohol, reducing the effects the user may feel from the alcohol.

"Of course, the best way to avoid problems is to not use either substance," said Mr Dillon.

"It is important that cannabis users are aware of the risks of mixing these two drugs. There is increasing evidence that the cannabis use in Australia is decreasing, however, amongst those do use the drug we are continuing to see potentially dangerous practices – particularly high levels of polydrug use."

"Cannabis is a risky drug when used alone, combined with alcohol the risks are much greater."

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