

Factsheet: Cannabis - the Irish situation

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Glossary of terms

Drug prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that has used a named drug during a particular time period. That is, how many people in specific group have used a drug during a specified timeframe.

Last month prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that reported using a named drug in the 30-day period prior to the survey. Last month prevalence is often referred to as current use. Some of those reporting current use may be occasional or first-time users who happen to have used in the period leading up to the survey, so current use is not the same as regular use.

Last year prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that reported using a named drug in the 12 months prior to the survey. Last year prevalence is often referred to as recent use.

Lifetime prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that reported ever having used a named drug before the time they were surveyed. A person who records lifetime prevalence may or may not be currently using the drug. Lifetime prevalence should not be interpreted as meaning that people have used a drug over a long period of time or that they will use the drug again in future.

Representative sample – a subset of a larger population that reflects the characteristics of that entire group.

What is cannabis?

Cannabis is a natural product, the main psychoactive constituent of which is tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Herbal cannabis consists of the dried flowering tops and leaves. Cannabis resin is a compressed solid made from the resinous parts of the plant, and cannabis (hash) oil is a solvent extract of cannabis. In some countries, herbal cannabis and cannabis resin are formally known as marijuana and hashish. Cannabis cigarettes may be called reefers, joints or spliffs.¹

What does cannabis do?

All forms of cannabis are mind-altering and act by affecting the part of the brain where memories are formed. Small doses have very mild effects, sometimes none in the first-time user. Short-term effects of cannabis may include:

- Feeling sedated, chilled out and happy
- Feeling sick
- Feeling hungry or getting 'the munchies'
- Heart rate speeds up and blood pressure goes down
- Dry mouth
- Tiredness
- Bloodshot eyes.²

Long term effects of include :

- May damage your lungs and lead to breathing problems
- Has been linked with mental health problems, such as depression and schizophrenia
- May lower sperm count and suppress ovulation, so may make getting pregnant more problematic
- Regular use may effect your memory, mood, motivation and ability to learn
- May cause anxiety and 'paranoia'
- May effect coordination and reactions, so you are more at risk of accidents, especially if you use it with alcohol or other drugs

How do we know how many people use cannabis in Ireland?

The Healthy Ireland survey is an annual survey designed to increase knowledge of the population's health and health behaviours.³ It is commissioned by the Department of Health, carried out by Ipsos B&A, and conducted with a representative sample of the population of the Republic of Ireland aged 15 years and over. For the 2023 survey, telephone interviews took place between October 2022 and April 2023. 6,407 out of the total 7,411 survey respondents agreed to participate in the module on drug use providing a participation rate of 86% of survey respondents.

(For surveys about drug use in other populations, see our [prevalence sources](#).)

How many people use cannabis in Ireland?

According to the Healthy Ireland survey, in 2022/23:

- One in five people (20%) reported using cannabis at least once in their lifetime (lifetime cannabis use).³
- Lifetime cannabis use is more common in men (26%) than women (15%), and also among younger age groups, as 31% of those aged 15-24 have used cannabis compared to 4% of those aged 65 and over.
- 6% of respondents reported using cannabis in the last year, with 3% using cannabis in the last month.
- Cannabis use within the last year is more common among men (8%) than women (4%).
- Cannabis use within the last year has increased across all age groups since the 2002/3 survey, see Table 1.
- Cannabis use in the last month is most common among those aged 15-24 (8%), compared to 1% of those aged 45-54.
- Lifetime cannabis use was 24.1%, last year use was 7.4%, and last month use was 3.3%

Table 1: Last year prevalence of cannabis use by age group (%)

	2002/03	2006/07	2010/11	2014/15	2019/20	2022/23
15–64 years	5.1	6.3	6.0	7.7	7.1	7.4
15–34 years	8.7	10.6	10.3	13.8	13.8	14.8

Source: unpublished data

For further information on cannabis use (prevalence and treatment) see the [2019–20 NDAS survey](#) or our [Regional data factsheets](#).

Cannabis is the most used illicit drug in Europe, across all age groups. Cannabis use within the last year among the European Union population aged 15–34 is estimated at 15.4% (15.5 million), with males being typically twice as likely to report use as females.⁴

How many 15–16-year-old students in Ireland use cannabis?

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has conducted surveys of school-going children every four years since 1995, using a standardised method and a common questionnaire (see www.espad.org). The eight survey⁵ was undertaken in 37 European countries during 2024 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 15-16-year-old students. In Ireland the final sample included 1,880 students born in 2008. The study found that:

- 88.2% of students reported never using cannabis, see Table 2.
- 11.8% of students in Ireland used cannabis in their lifetime, compared to 11.3% all ESPAD countries.
- More male (12.1%) than female respondents (11.3%) have ever tried cannabis (lifetime use).
- 10.2% of students had used cannabis in the last 12 months (recent use).
- 4.9% had used cannabis in the last 30 days (current use).

- Age 14 years was the most frequently reported starting age for using cannabis (4.4%). Females were more likely to start using it at 14 years of age (5.2%), males at 15 (4.8%).
- 28.5% perceived that it would be fairly or very easy to get cannabis if they wanted it.
- 22.5% saw no risk in trying cannabis once or twice, 33.7% perceived slight risk, 19.5% moderate risk, and 16.1% great risk.
- 4.9% had smoked cannabis before midday and 4.5% had smoked it alone. Students reported experiencing problems due to cannabis use, namely memory problems (5%) and other problems such as arguments, fights, accidents, and poor school results (2.8%).
- Among those who said that they used cannabis 37.6% of students were classified as high-risk cannabis users. Female students who used cannabis were more likely than male students to be classified as high-risk users (36.8% vs 35.6%).

Table 2: Cannabis: prevalence of lifetime use, 2024

Lifetime cannabis use	Total N (%)	Male N (%)	Female N (%)	Rather not say N (%)
Never	1,652 (88.2)	794 (87.9)	832 (88.7)	26 (78.8)
Ever	222 (11.8)	109 (12.1)	106 (11.3)	7 (21.2)
1–2 times	66 (3.5)	29 (3.2)	36 (3.8)	1 (3.0)
3–5 times	51 (2.7)	26 (2.9)	24 (2.6)	1 (3.0)
6–9 times	21 (1.1)	10 (1.1)	9 (1.0)	2 (6.1)
10–19 times	24 (1.3)	14 (1.6)	9 (1.0)	1 (3.0)
20–39 times	16 (0.9)	5 (0.6)	11 (1.2)	0 (0.0)
40 or more times	44 (2.3)	25 (2.8)	17 (1.8)	2 (6.1)
Total	1874 (100.0)	903 (48.2)	938 (50.1)	33 (1.8)

Note: N is the number of cases. The percentage is in brackets

For further information go to the [ESPAD data portal](#) where you can search for “cannabis” and filter by Ireland.

For further information on cannabis use by young people see [Factsheet: young people, drugs and alcohol: the Irish situation](#)

How many people receive treatment for cannabis use?

The [National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#) (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland^a When someone in treatment has been using multiple drugs, one is identified as their ‘main problem’ drug.

^a The NDTRS contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number in continuous care. Note: Cases are episodes of treatment not individuals, which means there is a possibility that individuals appear more than once in the data; for example, where a person receives treatment at more than one centre, or at the same centre more than once in a calendar year.

In 2024, 13,295 cases entered treatment for problem drug use. This is the highest annual number recorded by the NDTRS to date and an increase of 191 cases compared to 2023, see Table 3. The most recent published data from the NDTRS⁶ shows that:

- Cannabis was the third most common main problem drug reported in 2024 (17.0%, 2,263 cases).
- Among cases aged 19 years or under, cannabis was the main drug generating treatment demand.
- Among new cases (never treated before) the proportion reporting cannabis as a main problem decreased from 29.1% in 2023 to 27.5% in 2024.
- Cannabis (40.1%) was the most common additional drug in 2024 reported by cases with polydrug use (those using several drugs).
- The proportion of cases treated for cannabis as a main problem decreased from 24.7% in 2017 to 17.0% in 2024, though the number of cases fluctuated over the period; 2,200 cases in 2017 compared to 2,263 cases in 2024.

Table 3: Main problem drug (excluding alcohol) reported in 30 days prior to treatment, NDTRS 2017 to 2024

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N(%)
All cases	8,922	10,274	10,664	9,702	10,769	12,009	13,104	13,295
Cannabis	2,200 (24.7)	2,358 (23.0)	2,502 (23.5)	2,120 (21.9)	2,299 (21.3)	2,245 (18.7)	2,292 (17.5)	2,263 (17.0)
New cases	3,257	3,962	3,979	3,796	4,206	4,456	4,792	4,771
Cannabis	1,272 (39.1)	1,505 (38.0)	1,506 (37.8)	1,338 (35.2)	1,479 (35.2)	1,463 (32.8)	1,394 (29.1)	1,312 (27.5)
Previously treated cases	5,242	5,872	5,927	5,441	6,090	6,860	7,588	7,717
Cannabis	807 (15.4)	717 (12.2)	784 (13.2)	691 (12.7)	740 (12.2)	711 (10.4)	776 (10.2)	821 (10.6)

Note: N is the number of cases. The percentage is in brackets

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2023 see library [interactive tables](#)]

What does the law say about cannabis?

In Ireland, cannabis is on the list of drugs that are controlled by law. A person found in possession of cannabis or cannabis resin is guilty of an offence. It is also an offence to grow cannabis plants. You can find more information about Irish drug laws, offences and penalties on the [Citizens Information Board website](#).

Seizures of cannabis

Seizures are made by Garda and Revenue Customs officers and include cannabis herb, plants and resin. In 2023, a total of 3,491 kg of cannabis (herbal and resin) with an estimated value of €66.8 million was intercepted in 2,513 separate seizures. The number of cannabis seizures in 2023 (2,513)

was nearly 7% higher than 2022 (2,354). However, the quantity seized in 2023 (3,491 kg) was just over double the quantity seized in 2022 (1,683 kg).⁷

The Gardaí send drugs seized to [Forensic Science Ireland \(FSI\)](#) for analysis. Cannabis-type (herb, plants and resin) seizures accounted for over 46% of all drug seizures in 2023 (see Figure T2.1.1 of the national report for more detail⁷). Following a slight decrease between 2003 and 2004, seizures of cannabis-type substances increased from 2005 to reach a peak in 2008. Between 2008 and 2009, the number of such seizures decreased by approximately 60%. Although there was a 38% spike in seizures in 2011, an annual decreasing trend was evident between 2011 and 2015; 2015 figures were approximately 35% lower than those reported in 2011. One possible explanation for this outcome is that gardaí targeted the cannabis cultivation industry in numerous operations during that time frame. Between 2015 and 2017, an increasing trend was evident.

While FSI analyses reduced by 21% between 2017 and 2018, the number of cannabis-type seizures in 2019 (3,691) was more than double the number analysed in 2018. While a slight increase was evident in 2020, it was very small (less than 0.5%). The number of seizures analysed in 2021 (7,866) was two times higher than the number analysed in 2020 (3,706). The total number of cannabis-type seizures analysed in 2022 (7,358) was 6.5% lower than 2021. This decreasing trend continued between 2022 and 2023 (14%).⁷

References

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For regional Irish data, please see our [regional factsheets webpage](#).

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