Factsheet: Cannabis - the Irish situation

November 2026

Table of Contents

Glossary of terms 1
What is cannabis? 2
What does cannabis do? 2
How do we know how many people use cannabis in Ireland? 3
How many people use cannabis in Ireland? 3
How many 15–16-year-old students in Ireland use cannabis? 3
How many people receive treatment for cannabis use? 4
What does the law say about cannabis? 5
Seizures of cannabis 5
References 6

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 comes from a plant. It can make you feel relaxed, giggly, anxious or paranoid.

Cannabis can come as:

- weed or grass - dried leaves and flowers (buds)
- hash - brown dried resin
- oils or concentrates

People may smoke, eat, drink or vape cannabis.

Cannabis is the most used illegal drug in Ireland. Young people and people with mental health difficulties are most at risk of negative effects from cannabis[1]

What does cannabis do?

Cannabis can cause:

- bloodshot eyes
- dry mouth
- increased appetite (the munchies)
- dizziness, nausea and vomiting (a whitey or white-out)
- problems with thinking or memory
- slow reaction times
- sleep problems
- increased heart rate
- fertility problems - it reduces sperm count in males and disrupts ovulation in females
- breathing problems - especially if you mix cannabis with tobacco or use plastic bottles as bongs
- paranoia[1]

Cannabis and the developing brain:

The brain continues to develop until around age 25. This means that young people are more sensitive to damage from cannabis.

Young people who start using cannabis before age 18 are more likely to have long-term problems.

These include:

- cannabis dependency
- mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression
- problems with thinking, memory and concentration

Even low use of cannabis can affect brain health in young people.

Some people may have other risk factors that increase the risk of psychosis.[1]

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.[2] 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 is highest among those aged 15-24 (18%), compared to just 1% of those aged 55-64.
- 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 18% (8.6 million).[3]

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 seventh survey[4] was undertaken in 39 European countries during 2019 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 15-16-year-old students. In Ireland, 1,949 questionnaires were completed by young people, who were born in 2003, from 50 randomly selected post-primary schools. The study found that:

- More male (23.8%) than female respondents (14.7%) have ever tried cannabis (lifetime use).
- 16% of students had used cannabis in the last 12 months (recent use).
- 9% had used cannabis in the last 30 days (current use).
- Around 79% of students who had used cannabis first did so at age 14 or 15 and the mean (average) age of initiation was 15.2 years old.
- 42% perceived that it would be fairly or very easy to get cannabis if they wanted it.
- 31.9% of respondents said that there was no risk in trying cannabis.

For further information on cannabis use by young people see Factsheet: young people, drugs and alcohol: the Irish situation

The European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) has developed the **European Web Survey on Drugs** (EWSD)[5] in order to collect data from a wide range of people who use drugs. In 2024, Ireland participated in the EWSD for the second time. The 2024 Irish EWSD was an online, convenience, non-probability survey. The study population included people aged 18 years and over who lived in Ireland and who had used drugs in the previous 12 months. The final sample for analysis was 2,406, of whom 63.1% were male and 35.7% were female.

Table 2: Last year prevalence of cannabis use by gender (%)

All	Male	Female
N = 2,406	n = 1,518	n = 858
85.4	86.6	83.2

Table 3: Last month prevalence of cannabis use by gender (%)

All	Male	Female
N = 2,406	n = 1,518	n = 858
65.2	69.4	57.1

Source: European web survey on drugs 2024: Irish results

For more information see chapter 4: Cannabis and cannabinoid-related products

How many people receive treatment for cannabis use?

The data are drawn from National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS) which is the national database that records and reports on treated problem alcohol and drug use in Ireland. Treatment for problem alcohol and drug use in Ireland is provided by statutory and non-statutory services, including residential centres, community-based addiction services, general practices, and prison services. The dataset contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include service users in continuous care. As

there is currently no national system-wide unique identifier in the Irish health system, the NDTRS records cases of treatment. In any given year, individuals may appear more than once if treated in different centres or if they return to treatment in the same centre.

The most recent published data from the NDTRS[6] shows that:

- Cannabis was the third most common main problem drug reported in 2025 (15.1%, 2,332 cases).
- The proportion of cases treated for cannabis as a main problem decreased from 24.7% in 2017 to 15.1% in 2025, though the number of cases fluctuated over the period.
- Among cases aged 19 years or younger, cannabis was the main drug generating treatment demand.
- Among *new cases* (never treated before) the proportion reporting cannabis as a main problem decreased from 32.8% in 2022 to 23.3% in 2025.
- Cannabis (44.8%) was the most common additional drug in 2025 reported by cases with polydrug use (those using several drugs).

Table 4: Main problem drug (excluding alcohol) reported in 30 days prior to treatment, NDTRS 2017 to 2025

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
	N (%)	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	15,422
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)	2,332 (15.1)
New cases	3,257	3,962	3,979	3,796	4,206	4,456	4,792	4,471	5,134
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)	1,195 (23.3)
Previously treated cases	5,242	5,872	5,927	5,441	6,090	6,860	7,588	7,718	9,333
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)	1,022 (11.0)

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

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2025 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 2024, other types of cannabis products were seized and submitted for analysis (N=181). Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) including trace amounts was detected in 164 seizures. According to FSI, 'trace amount' generally means a very small amount of a substance in the presence of something

else, or it might be the residue of a drug on tinfoil (personal communication, FSI, 2019). In addition, seizures analysed included cannabinol (n=6), cannabigerol (n=6), cannabinol (n=3), cannabidiol (n=1). One seizure contained THC acetate. [7]

The Gardaí send drugs seized to Forensic Science Ireland (FSI) for analysis. In 2020, there was a slight increase in the analysis of cannabis herb seizures, however between 2020 and 2021, the number of analyses increased over twofold for cannabis herb (121%). The analysis of cannabis herb decreased between 2021 and 2022 (8%), and a larger decrease was evident between 2022 and 2023 (12%). Cannabis herb analysis increased by 8% between 2023 and 2024. The analysis of cannabis resin decreased annually from 2019 (N=422) to 2021 (N=205). In contrast to the previous year, between 2021 and 2022, the analysis of cannabis resin seizures increased by 43%. Between 2022 and 2023, a small increase was evident (4%) with a larger increase evident between 2023 and 2024 (22%). Between 2020 and 2021 the analysis of cannabis plants increased by 138%. Since 2021 the analysis of cannabis plants decreased between 2021 and 2022 (4%) and a larger decrease evident between 2022 and 2023 (52%). However, between 2023 and 2024 a small increase was evident (3%). [7]

References

1. Health Service Executive (2026) Effects and dependency - Cannabis. [Accessed 08 October 2026]
2. Ipsos B&A (2023) Healthy Ireland survey 2023 - summary report. Dublin: Department of Health.
3. European Drugs Agency (2026) European drug report 2026: trends and developments. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
4. Sunday S, Keogan S, Hanafin J and Clancy L (2020) ESPAD 2019 Ireland. Dublin: TobaccoFree Research Institute Ireland.
5. Mongan, D, Killeen, N Keenan, E Millar SR and Galvin B (2026) European web survey on drugs 2024: Irish results. Dublin: Health Research Board
6. Tierney, P Lynch T, O'Sullivan M and Carew AM (2026) National drug treatment reporting system, 2025 drug treatment demand. Dublin: Health Research Board.
7. Health Research Board. Irish National Focal Point to the European Drugs Agency (2026) Ireland: national report for 2025 - drug markets and crime. Dublin: Health Research Board.

For regional Irish data, please see our regional factsheets webpage.

How to cite this factsheet:

HRB National Drugs Library (2026) Cannabis - the Irish situation. HRB National Drugs Library, Dublin https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/45959/

****

Other Factsheets in this series:

Alcohol - the Irish situation
Cocaine - the Irish situation
Gambling - the Irish situation
MDMA/ecstasy - the Irish situation
New psychoactive substances (NPS) - the Irish situation

Opioids - the Irish situation
Sedatives and tranquillisers - the Irish situation
Smoking - the Irish situation
Young people, drugs and alcohol - the Irish situation

HRB National Drugs Library – Find the evidence
www.drugsandalcohol.ie

- Freely available collection of Irish and international drug and alcohol research
- Quick updates – e-newsletter, Drugnet Ireland and LinkedIN
- Key Irish data resources – treatment, deaths, prevalence, regional data, alcohol links
- Key Irish data summaries – factsheets & annual national reports
- Policy – policy webpage & Dail debates
- Practitioner portal – specific webpages for those working in the area
- Course directory
- Glossary – with explanations of terms and acronyms
- Research resources for those conducting literature searches and other research
- Search our collection – basic and advanced (you can save your results)

HRB National Drugs Library
w www.drugsandalcohol.ie
e drugslibrary@hrb.ie
LinkedIn https://www.linkedin.com/company/hrb-national-drugs-library/