



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### The neurobiology of cannabis use disorders

*A call for evidence*

Lorenzetti, V.; Cousijn, J.; Solowij, N.; Garavan, H.; Chao, S.; Yücel, M.; Verdejo-García, A.

**DOI**

[10.3389/fnbeh.2016.00086](https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2016.00086)

**Publication date**

2016

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience

**License**

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Lorenzetti, V., Cousijn, J., Solowij, N., Garavan, H., Chao, S., Yücel, M., & Verdejo-García, A. (2016). The neurobiology of cannabis use disorders: A call for evidence. *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, 10(86). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2016.00086>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



# The Neurobiology of Cannabis Use Disorders: A Call for Evidence

Valentina Lorenzetti<sup>1\*</sup>, Janna Cousijn<sup>2</sup>, Nadia Solowij<sup>3</sup>, Hugh Garavan<sup>4</sup>, Chao Suo<sup>1</sup>, Murat Yücel<sup>1</sup> and Antonio Verdejo-García<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Psychological Sciences and Monash Institute of Cognitive and Clinical Neurosciences, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, <sup>2</sup> Addiction Development and Psychopathology Lab, Department of Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands, <sup>3</sup> School of Psychology, Centre for Health Initiatives and Illawarra Health and Medical Research Institute, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, Australia, <sup>4</sup> Department of Psychological Science, College of Arts and Sciences, The University of Vermont, Burlington, VT, USA

**Keywords:** neurobiology, cannabis use disorder, dependence, addiction, stress, physiological

## CANNABIS USE DISORDERS, WHY BOTHER?

Using cannabis is perceived by many as relatively harmless, but the adverse effects of problematic cannabis use are significant. Thirteen million individuals globally have Cannabis Use Disorders (CUDs; UNODC, 2015), with relapse rates comparable to those of other substance use disorders (~52–70%; Budney et al., 1999; Chauchard et al., 2013). Contrasting non-problematic recreational cannabis use, severe forms of CUD involve compulsive use despite significant harms to mental health; high stress levels (craving, withdrawal); cognitive deficits; academic and work absenteeism; and significant risky behaviors, such as driving and operating machinery while intoxicated. Worryingly, the concentration of  $\Delta^9$ -tetrahydrocannabinol, the compound driving the addiction liability of cannabis, has risen in cannabis products over the past decade (UNODC, 2015).

## NEUROCOGNITIVE MECHANISMS UNDERLYING CUDS: WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW

Mounting (although mixed) evidence shows that regular cannabis use is linked to abnormal neurobiology (Lorenzetti et al., 2014) in regions subserving reward, craving/urges, and cognitive control—key components of addiction (Everitt and Robbins, 2005). Neurobiological studies of CUDs specifically are sparse and limited because diagnostic assessments of CUDs are rarely performed (Lorenzetti and Cousijn, 2015). There is a strong need to study CUDs, given their high prevalence and treatment demands, and worldwide trends toward legalizing cannabis products.

Emerging evidence shows neuroadaptations in cannabis users with CUDs (Lorenzetti and Cousijn, 2015), which may be related to the development of addictive behaviors (i.e., reduced prefrontal control, alteration in reward systems, and increased stress, anxiety, and withdrawal). CUDs may exacerbate and expand the neurobiological alterations associated with pre-existing general vulnerability to drug use and recreational cannabis use, particularly in addiction-relevant areas (Ersche et al., 2010). Neurobiological models propose mechanisms of addiction related neuroadaptations within distinct brain regions in the transition from recreational, non-problem, and reward-driven drug use (ventral striatum, medial prefrontal cortex) to compulsive and habitual drug use (dorsal striatum, lateral prefrontal cortex, stress circuit; Everitt and Robbins, 2005, 2013). Specific aspects of severe CUDs (e.g., neural signatures of withdrawal, stress, craving, and compulsive use) may dissociate from the direct effects of cannabis exposure in milder forms of CUDs (e.g., possibly limited to brain areas high in cannabinoid receptors). This notion is yet to be tested. Neurobiological models of addiction and the transition from regular heavy use to compulsive drug use mostly rely on preclinical evidence from artificially induced drug taking of

## OPEN ACCESS

### Edited by:

George W. Huntley,  
Icahn School of Medicine at Mount  
Sinai, USA

### Reviewed by:

Alain Dervaux,  
Centre Hospitalier Sainte-Anne,  
France  
Francesca Filbey,  
University of Texas at Dallas, USA  
Daniel E. Adkins,  
Virginia Commonwealth University,  
USA

### \*Correspondence:

Valentina Lorenzetti  
valentina.lorenzetti@gmail.com

**Received:** 01 February 2016

**Accepted:** 18 April 2016

**Published:** 10 May 2016

### Citation:

Lorenzetti V, Cousijn J, Solowij N,  
Garavan H, Suo C, Yücel M and  
Verdejo-García A (2016) The  
Neurobiology of Cannabis Use  
Disorders: A Call for Evidence.  
*Front. Behav. Neurosci.* 10:86.  
doi: 10.3389/fnbeh.2016.00086

substances other than cannabis such as cocaine (Ito et al., 2002; Vanderschuren et al., 2005; See et al., 2007). Emerging evidence in human cocaine users has elucidated neural network changes involved in compulsive drug use at the level of frontal-striatal circuits and these neural changes have been linked to drug relapse, validating preclinical models of drug addiction (Contreras-Rodriguez et al., 2015; Hu et al., 2015). Supportive evidence for these models also comes from a study of alcohol dependent individuals (Vollstädt–Klein et al., 2010) and functional imaging studies in cannabis users (Filbey and Dunlop, 2014; Vingerhoets et al., 2016) implicating frontal-striatal pathways. Most human studies of cannabis users, however, compare groups of heavy cannabis users with varying levels of cannabis related problems to controls without assessing CUD severity with rigorous diagnostic instruments. As such, little is known about the neurobiology underlying cannabis addiction.

Addiction-specific neural alterations—rather than those associated with use *per se*—are likely to predict negative outcomes in cannabis users. Consistent with this notion, dependent users have worse mental health outcomes than non-dependent users (Van der Pol et al., 2013b,c). Moreover, severity of cannabis use-related problems—rather than quantity of use—predicts activity in reward-related brain regions in response to cannabis cues, which is a well-validated measure of craving (Cousijn et al., 2013). Uncovering whether CUDs involve neuroadaptations dissociable from those linked to recreational, non-problem cannabis use is critical.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Important steps to resolve addiction vs. exposure dependent alterations in cannabis users include the characterization of the neural, behavioral, polygenic risk markers, and epigenetics (Sherva et al., 2016; Walters and Owen, 2016) that identify (i) which recreational cannabis users or cannabis naïve individuals are vulnerable to develop a CUD; (ii) the recreational non-problem cannabis users en route to develop a severe CUD; (iii) which users have persistent severe CUDs (Van der Pol et al., 2013a); (iv) which users transit to a lower severity CUD/non-problem cannabis use/abstinence; and (v) sex differences in the development of CUDs, as females are underrepresented in the existing literature, while presenting a distinct profile from males (e.g., faster transition to dependence, more treatment resistant; Lorenzetti and Carter, 2015).

Twin studies are required to address the above research question (i) and disentangle epigenetic factors that confer risk to develop CUDs in some but not others (Gillespie et al., 2009). Large-scale longitudinal studies are warranted to address research questions (i)–(v) and track young adolescents yet naïve to cannabis through to late adulthood. Such studies should combine diagnostic cutoffs that inform on the clinical significance of cannabis use (i.e., DSM 5, ICD-10); self-reported

detailed information on cannabis use (daily/almost daily use, duration, and age of onset); objective (i.e., biological specimens) quantification of cannabinoids (Lorenzetti et al., 2016); cognitive and brain anatomy/function (using MRI); and recruitment approaches that maximize sample representativeness (e.g., the general community, coffee shops; Van der Pol et al., 2011). Notable examples include the Netherlands XTC Toxicity (NeXT) study (De Win et al., 2005), the USA ABCD study <http://addictionresearch.nih.gov/abcd-study> and the Dutch Cannabis Dependence Study (CanDep; Van der Pol et al., 2011).

As longitudinal studies are very expensive and time consuming, we can address relevant research questions (i)–(vi) in a timely fashion, via re-examination, online data sharing, and follow up from already collected neuroscientific datasets on cannabis using cohorts with varying levels of problems with use. Problem vs. recreational users may be segregated (to enable their comparison) using information available from each study's instruments, on key addiction phenotypes (e.g., craving, withdrawal, difficulties in controlling use, persistent use despite harmful consequences on mental health, and socio-occupational functioning, higher priority given to drug use than to other activities and obligations; APA., 2013; WHO, 2016). A notable example of this includes the internationally coordinated initiative ENIGMA Addiction Working Group (Mackey et al., 2016).

Finally, we propose the development of an agreed-upon instrument to objectively assess key features of cannabis addiction vs. non-problem use in neuroscientific settings, as most measures of cannabis related problems are borrowed from those used for other substances, the features of which may not fit those relevant to cannabis dependence (Lorenzetti et al., 2016). To this end, a Delphi review (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963) with world-class experts in the clinical/neuroscientific aspects of cannabis and substance dependence may be conducted and may identify additional hot topics in CUDs.

In conclusion, we call for a greater, systematic and coordinated research effort internationally, to identify pathways in and out of CUDs and fill the existing gap between the limited knowledge on CUDs and the increasing availability of cannabis products.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

VL and JC formulated the key concepts and led the writing of the commentary; NS, HG, CS, and MY contributed to the concepts and writing of the commentary. AV contributed to the key concepts and to the writing of the commentary.

## FUNDING

NS is supported by the Australian Research Council Future Fellowship FT110100752. MY is supported by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia, Senior Research Fellowship.

## REFERENCES

- APA (2013). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Washington, DC.
- Budney, A. J., Novy, P. L., and Hughes, J. R. (1999). Marijuana withdrawal among adults seeking treatment for marijuana dependence. *Addiction* 94, 1311–1322. doi: 10.1046/j.1360-0443.1999.94913114.x
- Chauchard, E., Levin, K. H., Copersino, M. L., Heishman, S. J., and Gorelick, D. A. (2013). Motivations to quit cannabis use in an adult non-treatment sample: are they related to relapse? *Addict. Behav.* 38, 2422–2427. doi: 10.1016/j.addbeh.2013.04.002
- Contreras-Rodríguez, O., Albein-Urios, N., Perales, J. C., Martínez-Gonzalez, J. M., Vilar-López, R., Fernández-Serrano, M. J., et al. (2015). Cocaine-specific neuroplasticity in the ventral striatum network is linked to delay discounting and drug relapse. *Addiction* 110, 1953–1962. doi: 10.1111/add.13076
- Cousijn, J., Wiers, R. W., Ridderinkhof, K. R., Brink, W., Veltman, D. J., Porrino, L. J., et al. (2013). Individual differences in decision making and reward processing predict changes in cannabis use: a prospective functional magnetic resonance imaging study. *Addict. Biol.* 18, 1013–1023. doi: 10.1111/j.1369-1600.2012.00498.x
- Dalkey, N., and Helmer, O. (1963). An experimental application of the Delphi method to the use of experts. *Manage. Sci.* 9, 458–467. doi: 10.1287/mnsc.9.3.458
- De Win, M. M., Jager, G., Vervaeke, H. K., Schilt, T., Reneman, L., Booij, J., et al. (2005). The Netherlands XTC Toxicity (NeXT) study: objectives and methods of a study investigating causality, course, and clinical relevance. *Int. J. Methods Psychiatr. Res.* 14, 167–185. doi: 10.1002/mpr.6
- Ersche, K. D., Turton, A. J., Pradhan, S., Bullmore, E. T., and Robbins, T. W. (2010). Drug addiction endophenotypes: impulsive versus sensation-seeking personality traits. *Biol. Psychiatry* 68, 770–773. doi: 10.1016/j.biopsych.2010.06.015
- Everitt, B. J., and Robbins, T. W. (2005). Neural systems of reinforcement for drug addiction: from actions to habits to compulsion. *Nat. Neurosci.* 8, 1481–1489. doi: 10.1038/nn1579
- Everitt, B. J., and Robbins, T. W. (2013). From the ventral to the dorsal striatum: devolving views of their roles in drug addiction. *Neurosci. Biobehav. Rev.* 37, 1946–1954. doi: 10.1016/j.neubiorev.2013.02.010
- Filbey, F. M., and Dunlop, J. (2014). Differential reward network functional connectivity in cannabis dependent and non-dependent users. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 140, 101–111. doi: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2014.04.002
- Gillespie, N. A., Neale, M. C., and Kendler, K. S. (2009). Pathways to cannabis abuse: a multi-stage model from cannabis availability, cannabis initiation and progression to abuse. *Addiction* 104, 430–438. doi: 10.1111/j.1360-0443.2008.02456.x
- Hu, Y., Salmeron, B. J., Gu, H., Stein, E. A., and Yang, Y. (2015). Impaired functional connectivity within and between frontostriatal circuits and its association with compulsive drug use and trait impulsivity in cocaine addiction. *JAMA Psychiatry* 72, 584–592. doi: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2015.1
- Ito, R., Dalley, J. W., Robbins, T. W., and Everitt, B. J. (2002). Dopamine release in the dorsal striatum during cocaine-seeking behavior under the control of a drug-associated cue. *J. Neurosci.* 22, 6247–6253. Available online at: <http://www.jneurosci.org/content/22/14/6247.long>
- Lorenzetti, V., and Carter, A. (2015). “Men and women use cannabis for different reasons,” in *The Conversation*, ed A. Hansen (Melbourne, VIC). Available online at: <http://theconversation.com/men-and-women-use-cannabis-for-different-reasons-46745>
- Lorenzetti, V., and Cousijn, J. (2015). “Cannabis use disorders and brain morphology,” in *Neuropathology of Drug Addictions and Substance Misuse: Common Substances of Abuse - Tobacco, Alcohol, Cannabinoids and Opioids*, Vol. 1, ed V. R. Preedy (London, UK: Elsevier Inc.), 773–785. doi: 10.1016/B978-0-12-800213-1.00072-9
- Lorenzetti, V., Solowij, N., Fornito, A., Lubman, D. I., and Yücel, M. (2014). The association between regular cannabis exposure and alterations of human brain morphology: an updated review of the literature. *Curr. Pharm. Des.* 20, 2138–2167. doi: 10.2174/13816128113199990435
- Lorenzetti, V., Solowij, N., and Yücel, M. (2016). The role of cannabinoids in neuroanatomic alterations in cannabis users. *Biol. Psychiatry* 79, e17–e31. doi: 10.1016/j.biopsych.2015.11.013
- Mackey, S., Kan, K., Chaarani, B., Alia-Klein, N., Batalla, A., Brooks, S., et al. (2016). Genetic imaging consortium: from neuroimaging to genes. *Prog. Brain Res.* 224, 203–223. doi: 10.1016/bs.pbr.2015.07.026
- See, R., Elliott, J., and Feltenstein, M. (2007). The role of dorsal vs ventral striatal pathways in cocaine-seeking behavior after prolonged abstinence in rats. *Psychopharmacology* 194, 321–331. doi: 10.1007/s00213-007-0850-8
- Sherva, R., Wang, Q., Kranzler, H., Zhao, H., Koesterer, R., Herman, A., et al. (2016). Genome-wide association study of cannabis dependence severity, novel risk variants, and shared genetic risks. *JAMA Psychiatry* 73, 472–480. doi: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.0036
- UNODC (2015). *World Drug Report 2015*. World Drug Report Series. Geneva: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- Van der Pol, P., Liebrechts, N., De Graaf, R., Korf, D. J., Van den Brink, W., and Van Laar, M. (2013a). Facilitators and barriers in treatment seeking for cannabis dependence. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 133, 776–780. doi: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2013.08.011
- Van der Pol, P., Liebrechts, N., De Graaf, R., Korf, D. J., Van den Brink, W., and Van Laar, M. (2013b). Predicting the transition from frequent cannabis use to cannabis dependence: a three-year prospective study. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 133, 352–359. doi: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2013.06.009
- Van der Pol, P., Liebrechts, N., De Graaf, R., Korf, D. J., Van den Brink, W., and Van Laar, M. (2011). The Dutch Cannabis Dependence (CanDep) study on the course of frequent cannabis use and dependence: objectives, methods and sample characteristics. *Int. J. Methods Psychiatr. Res.* 20, 169–181. doi: 10.1002/mpr.345
- Van der Pol, P., Liebrechts, N., De Graaf, R., Ten Have, M., Korf, D. J., Van den Brink, W., et al. (2013c). Mental health differences between frequent cannabis users with and without dependence and the general population. *Addiction* 108, 1459–1469. doi: 10.1111/add.12196
- Vanderschuren, L. J., Di Ciano, P., and Everitt, B. J. (2005). Involvement of the dorsal striatum in cue-controlled cocaine seeking. *J. Neurosci.* 25, 8665–8670. doi: 10.1523/JNEUROSCI.0925-05.2005
- Vingerhoets, W., Koenders, L., Van Den Brink, W., Wiers, R., Goudriaan, A., Van Amelsvoort, T., et al. (2016). Cue-induced striatal activity in frequent cannabis users independently predicts cannabis problem severity three years later. *J. Psychopharmacol.* 30, 152–158. doi: 10.1177/0269881115620436
- Vollstädt-Klein, S., Wichert, S., Rabinstein, J., Bühler, M., Klein, O., Ende, G., et al. (2010). Initial, habitual and compulsive alcohol use is characterized by a shift of cue processing from ventral to dorsal striatum. *Addiction* 105, 1741–1749. doi: 10.1111/j.1360-0443.2010.03022.x
- Walters, J. R., and Owen, M. J. (2016). Genome-wide significant associations for cannabis dependence severity: relevance to psychiatric disorders. *JAMA Psychiatry* 73, 443–444. doi: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2016.0046
- WHO (2016). *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*. Geneva: WHO.

**Conflict of Interest Statement:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Copyright © 2016 Lorenzetti, Cousijn, Solowij, Garavan, Suo, Yücel and Verdejo-Garcia. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) or licensor are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.