

# Medical Cannabis and Cancer



Lifestyle

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**A**


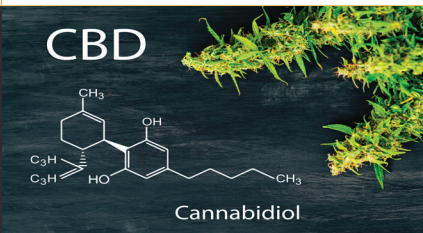
**What is medical cannabis?**

**Cannabis** (also known as marijuana) refers to certain plants that have psychoactive (mind-altering) properties.

**Medical cannabis** is the use of cannabis to help with certain health conditions. Medical cannabis is prescribed by certified health care practitioners.

Cannabis plants contain hundreds of chemicals. The chemicals responsible for the mind-altering effects are called **cannabinoids**.

The 2 most common cannabinoids are **tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)** and **cannabidiol (CBD)**, but there are over 100 more parts with unknown effects.

THC	CBD
<p>Produces the "high" that people think of with using cannabis.</p>	<p>Has mind-altering effects but does not usually cause the cannabis "high" like THC.</p>
	



**It is important for you to know how much THC and CBD are in the product you are taking.**

**Note:** We will use "medical cannabis" when we talk about cannabinoids in the rest of the booklet.

**Medical cannabis** can be **either**:

1. medical cannabis (dried marijuana or marijuana oils)
- or**
2. legal synthetic (manufactured) cannabis (capsules or sprays)



### **Medical cannabis**

This comes from the flowers, seeds and leaves of the cannabis plant. Different types and batches of each kind can vary in how strong (potent) they are.



### **Legal synthetic cannabis**

These are human-made chemicals that act like THC in your body. These medicines are available at a regular pharmacy with a prescription. Since these come in the form of a pill or oil, you know the dose and strength you are taking.

**Medicines that contain THC or CBD:**

- **Nabiximols (Sativex®)**. This is a medicine that is made from the cannabis plant. It has naturally-occurring THC and CBD.
- **Nabilone (Cesamet™)**. This medicine is made of synthetic THC.

## **B**

### **What is medical cannabis used for?**

There is some evidence that medical cannabis can help with:

- Chronic nerve pain
- End-of-life pain
- Nausea and vomiting caused by chemotherapy

Some people also use cannabis for anxiety (feeling worried or nervous), depression, insomnia (trouble falling or staying asleep), or to boost their appetite. We do not have good evidence that shows if medical cannabis is helpful for these problems or not.

There is no human clinical trial evidence that cannabis can reduce cancer growth, so currently we do not use it as a treatment for cancer.



### **Is medical cannabis right for everyone?**

**No.** Do not use cannabis if you:

- are allergic to cannabis
- have a history of psychosis
- are pregnant or breast-feeding
- have severe liver or kidney disease
- have a heart condition such as unstable angina, arrhythmia, low blood pressure (hypotension) or a recent heart attack
- have a low immune system
- are between the ages of 18 and 25



**Always talk with your health care team first, to see if medical cannabis is right for you.**

Some people worry that their health care provider does not want to talk about cannabis. Talk to your health care provider because cannabis may:

- affect your medications
- cause side effects
- be expensive
- improve your symptoms, leading to a change in other medication

C

## How can I use medical cannabis?

Medical cannabis comes in different forms and there are different ways you can use it.

- Oils: this is the best form for cancer patients. It absorbs quickly in your mouth and does not smell. **Direct use is best. We do not recommend using it for baking**, as the products change when heating and you cannot be sure of the dose or strength.
- Edibles (products you eat or swallow): cookies, chocolate, candy, teas, capsules or tinctures (drops).
- Suppositories that you insert into your rectum or vagina.
- Topically (applied to the skin).
- Inhaling (smoking or vaping). We **do not** recommend this. The smoke or gas may damage your lungs and cause lung infections.

D

## What are the health effects, impairment and risks of using cannabis?




### Health Effects

There are many short and long term health effects and risks that come with any cannabis use.

Health effects that are **very common** (affecting more than 1 person out of 10):

- Dry mouth
- Slower reaction time
- Hunger
- Euphoria: feeling very happy or excited
- Dysphoria: feeling low or sad

For a complete list, visit the **Government of Canada** website [www.canada.ca](http://www.canada.ca)

»  [Cannabis use, effects and risks](#)

- Sleepiness
- Sensitivity to colour and sound
- Withdrawal
- Muscle twitching
- Dizziness
- Low blood pressure

Health effects that are **common** (affecting up to 1 person out of 10):

- Blurred vision or visual hallucination
- Sudden onset of psychosis



## Impairment and risks

Cannabis can affect your:

- coordination
- reaction time
- ability to pay attention
- ability to make decisions
- ability to judge distances

Because of these effects, **do not**:

- drive
- operate equipment
- participate in high risk activities (skiing, biking)



Using alcohol or certain drugs (opioids or benzodiazepines) with cannabis will increase your impairment. This means you are at higher risk of injury or death from accidents.

**You will be at higher risk of falls, injuries or accidents.**



Be sure to arrange transportation to and from your medical appointments as needed.



## Cannabis Hyperemesis Syndrome (CHS)

CHS is a condition that leads to repeated and severe vomiting. It is rare and happens more often to daily long-term users of cannabis.

Symptoms may include:

- Ongoing nausea
- Repeated episodes of vomiting
- Belly pain
- Decreased food intake and weight loss
- Fluid loss (dehydration)
- An urge to take many hot showers or baths

Like many drugs, once you have taken cannabis, only time will reverse the effects. There is currently **no known cure**.



**If you have CHS, you should get medical help.** You may need some supportive care, like fluids, to help you during this time.





## Cannabis Poisoning

Taking too much cannabis at one time can cause cannabis poisoning. This is not usually fatal. It can be very unpleasant and potentially dangerous, sometimes requiring emergency medical attention or hospitalization.

Children and pets are at greater risk of cannabis poisoning.



It can take up to 4 hours to feel the full effects of cannabis that you eat or drink. Be careful before you eat or drink more.

Symptoms can include:

- chest pain
- rapid heartbeat
- nausea/ vomiting
- psychotic episode
- breathing too slowly
- severe anxiety and/ or panic attack



If you have cannabis poisoning, call:



Poison & Drug Information Service (PADIS)  
(toll-free 1-800-332-1414)



Health Link (811)

**If your symptoms are severe,  
go to the nearest Emergency Department**



## Addiction

**It is possible to become addicted to cannabis.**

Using cannabis regularly or often; or using a lot of it can lead to addiction. If you have a history of substance abuse, you may be at more risk of developing an addiction.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you are struggling with your cannabis use.

## E

## Where can I get medical cannabis?

**Talk to your health care team before using cannabis.**

Medical cannabis is safest when prescribed by someone who knows your medical issues, medications, and can provide follow up visits to monitor for side effects.

You can get a prescription from your doctor for cannabis or a synthetic cannabis medicine (Nabilone or Nabiximols) and fill it at your regular pharmacy. If your doctor is not an authorized prescriber of cannabis, they can refer you to someone who is.

Synthetic products (sprays or pills) are more likely to be recommended by your doctor because:

- they have been studied more
- doses can be controlled better
- some of the manufactured products might be covered by your drug plan

You can get plant-derived cannabis products from a list of approved licensed producers (LP). You can find a list on the Government of Canada website [www.canada.ca](http://www.canada.ca). Search: "[Getting cannabis from a licensed producer.](#)"



Remember, plant-based cannabis can vary in potency (strength). No matter what kind you are using, it is best to start with a very small amount and then increase it, **slowly**. Start with a product that has less THC and more CBD.

## F Can cannabis affect my medications?

**Yes, it can.** Cannabis may make some medications and cancer treatment less effective or lead to more side effects from the treatment or cannabis. **Check with your oncologist or pharmacist before using cannabis.**

Cannabis can interact with:

- cancer treatment medications
- anticoagulants
- sedatives
- antibiotics
- anti-depressants



Cannabis can also interact with alcohol.



Everyone is different. A person's response to cannabis can depend on:

- gender
- age
- experience with cannabis
- THC and CBD content
- medical conditions
- how often you use cannabis
- whether cannabis is taken with food, alcohol or other drugs and health products

G

Covering the costs



Is cannabis covered by my health plan?

Check with your extended health plan provider to see if they will cover medical cannabis by prescription.

You may be able to claim the cost of products bought from a Licensed Producer on your tax return.



It's cheaper to buy off the street than from a licensed retailer. Why can't I do that?

It is illegal to buy cannabis from an unlicensed producer. Also, there are no regulations in place to keep you safe when you buy from an unlicensed producer. This means that there is a:

- higher risk that the cannabis will contain something that could lead to you developing fungal or bacterial infections
- lack of control over THC and CBD the cannabis contains (some could be stronger than others)
- risk of the cannabis containing other drugs or things that we don't know about

Getting a prescription from a health care provider means you will have someone who can check your response to the cannabis, adjust your dose as needed and make changes to other medications as well. **It is the safest thing to do.**



## H

### Can I travel with cannabis?

You can travel within Canada with cannabis as long as you have **the original packaging from your licensed producer or a letter from your doctor.**

If you are travelling outside of Canada, you must have a permit authorized by **Health Canada.** It is still a serious criminal offence to transport cannabis in any form across the Canadian border. This includes anything containing THC or cannabidiol (CBD).



[www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/travel-voyage/cannabis-eng.html](http://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/travel-voyage/cannabis-eng.html)

## I


### Keeping others safe


Keep loved ones, pets and others safe by:

- storing cannabis products locked up (especially edible cannabis which can be mistaken for candy, treats or snacks)
- keeping cannabis products in their original packaging or containers
- not smoking cannabis around others



If a child is exposed to cannabis call:

 Poison & Drug Information Service (PADIS)  
(toll-free 1-800-332-1414)

 Health Link (811)

J

## Using medical cannabis in hospital



### Can I use medical cannabis if I am in hospital?

Yes. But there are guidelines you need to follow.

1. You must have one of these:
  - A medical document from an authorized prescriber,
  - Proof that the cannabis is from a licensed producer for medical purposes, **or**
  - Proof that you are registered with Health Canada (to produce your own cannabis).
2. The cancer doctor or nurse practitioner who is caring for you at the hospital will need to write an order for you, to have on your medical chart.
3. You must sign a **Patient Agreement and Waiver** form.



### How can I store my legal supply while in hospital?

- Cannabis must stay securely locked when you are not using it.
- Talk with your health care team about the best way to keep your cannabis safe and secure.
- You can identify a family or caregiver who can safely bring and remove your supply each time you need it.



**Smoking or vaping of medical and non-medical cannabis is not allowed in and on Alberta Health Services (AHS) property.**

For more information, read the AHS policy:

[bit.ly/cannabispolicy](https://bit.ly/cannabispolicy)

**K**

**More information**

Find reliable information about medical cannabis online here:

Alberta Health Services	<a href="https://drugsafe.ca">drugsafe.ca</a>
Towards Optimized Practice (Alberta) Brochure	<a href="https://bit.ly/albertacannabis">bit.ly/albertacannabis</a>
Health Canada	<a href="https://bit.ly/healthcanadacannabis">bit.ly/healthcanadacannabis</a>
Canadian Cancer Society	<a href="https://bit.ly/ccscannabis">bit.ly/ccscannabis</a>
Medical Marijuana	<a href="https://medicalmarijuana.ca">medicalmarijuana.ca</a>




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**Find this and other Alberta cancer care resources  
at your cancer centre and online:**

[www.cancercontrolalberta.ca](http://www.cancercontrolalberta.ca)

This book is meant to support the information your health care team gives you. It does not replace any information that your health care team gives you.

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Leading care through compassion, courage, learning and discovery

