

Medical Cannabis:

What patients with cancer need to know

What is medical cannabis?

Medical cannabis, also known as medical marijuana, comes from the flowers, seeds and leaves of the cannabis plant.

- Cannabinoids are the chemicals in cannabis that can act as drugs.
- The two most familiar cannabinoids are tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD).
- The amount of THC and CBD in a cannabis product is responsible for most of its effects.
- It is important for you to know how much THC and CBD are in the product you are taking.
- There is no human clinical trial evidence that cannabinoids have any effect on cancer growth.

What is medical cannabis used for?

- Pain
- Nausea: queasy feeling or feeling sick to your stomach
- Anxiety: a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease
- Insomnia: trouble falling asleep or staying asleep

Who should not use medical cannabis?

Do not use cannabis if you:

- Are allergic to cannabis
- Have a history of psychosis
- Are pregnant
- Have a heart condition such as unstable angina or a recent heart attack.

It is important that you speak with your health care team to see if cannabis is right for you.

How do I use medical cannabis?

- Extracts: this is the best form for cancer patients. It absorbs quickly in your mouth and does not smell.
- Edibles (products you eat or swallow): cookies, teas, capsules or tinctures (drops).
- Suppositories that you insert into your rectum (bum).
- We do not recommend inhaling (smoking or vaping) cannabis. The smoke or gas may damage your lungs.

What are the side effects of cannabis?

Side effects of THC can include:

- Dry mouth
- Slower reaction time
- Hunger
- Relaxation
- Euphoria: feeling very happy or excited
- Sleepiness
- Sensitivity to colour and sound

CBD does not usually cause these side effects.

There are no known long-term side effects from using cannabis extracts.

You should not drive for 6-8 hours after taking cannabis.



How much medical cannabis should I take?

Talk to your health care team before using cannabis.

It is best to start with a very small amount and then increase it slowly.

If you use a cannabis extract, it will take 30-90 minutes for it to work. It can take 2-3 hours for maximum effect. Wait 3-4 hours before taking another dose. It can take up to 8 hours for the effects to wear off.

Will I get addicted to cannabis?

You are unlikely to get addicted to cannabis if you are using it for a health reason.

Will cannabis interact with my medications?

Cannabis may interact with some medications. Check with your oncologist or pharmacist before using cannabis.

How can I legally get cannabis?

The Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that patients can use cannabis for medical reasons.

1. You can get a prescription from your doctor for a synthetic cannabinoid medicine (nabilone) or plant-based product (Nabiximols). Synthetic cannabinoids are human-made chemicals that act like THC in your body. These medicines are expensive but may be covered by extended health plans. You can fill the prescription at a regular pharmacy.
2. You can get plant-derived cannabis products from a list of approved licensed producers (LP). The list can be found at <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/industry-licensees-applicants/licensed-cultivators-processors-sellers.html#a1>.

When you look at the LP websites, look for an extract that has equal amounts of THC and CBD, or less THC than CBD if you have never tried medical cannabis before.

Each LP has a specific form that you must fill out. There is a different form for you to give to your doctor. The LP will mail the product you order to your home.

BC Cancer does not recommend getting cannabis from dispensaries or using cannabis that was grown in someone's home.

- Storefront cannabis dispensaries are either illegal or only licensed for recreational use. The quality of the cannabis from unlicensed dispensaries is not controlled.
- It is legal to get cannabis from a person authorized to grow cannabis at home. But the quality of this cannabis is not consistent.

Is cannabis covered by my health plan?

Nabilone and Nabiximols are expensive and not covered by Pharmacare or other provincial drug plans. Some extended health plans will cover them.

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

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 contact the embassy of the country you will be visiting and ask about their rules for medical cannabis.

Where can I get more information?

BC Cancer Medical Cannabis webpage:

<http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/medical-cannabis>

[MedicalMarijuana.ca](http://www.MedicalMarijuana.ca) has a lot of good information if you want to learn more about medical cannabis.

The Health Canada website has very detailed information about medical cannabis:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/topics/cannabis-for-medical-purposes.html>