



Medicinal Cannabis

What is medicinal cannabis?

Medicinal cannabis (medical marijuana) is made from the cannabis sativa plant and can be prescribed by doctors to alleviate symptoms or to treat certain medical conditions.^{1,2} It can also offer relief from the side effects of some treatments.¹

Most medicinal cannabis products contain the active ingredients cannabidiol (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) which have been found to have therapeutic benefits.^{1,3} THC has strong psychoactive effects such as euphoria and feeling relaxed or sleepy but has also been found to have pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory properties.³ CBD is thought to reduce some of the side effects of THC such as anxiety and may assist in controlling seizures and pain.^{2,3} There are different types of medicinal cannabis products (natural and man-made) available to treat different symptoms or conditions.^{1,2}

How is it taken?

Medicinal cannabis can be taken by mouth as a tablet, capsule, oil, liquid, mouth spray, nasal spray, applied to the skin (patches, gels and creams).² There is no standard dose that is suitable for all patients or all conditions.² Patients usually start on a low dose and is slowly increased to maximise its effectiveness while minimising the side effects.²



Medicinal cannabis²

What can it be used for?

Certain medicinal cannabis products can be used for the following conditions:^{1,2,4}

- Epilepsy
- Multiple sclerosis
- Symptoms associated with cancer and cancer treatment (e.g. nausea, pain)
- Chronic pain
- Neuropathic pain
- Improving appetite in people with cancer and HIV/AIDS
- Symptom relief in palliative care

Medicinal cannabis is generally only recommended when other treatments have not been effective.² A medical practitioner can apply to the government for approval to prescribe medicinal cannabis for any medical condition.¹

The doctor may have to provide evidence that medicinal cannabis may be effective for that particular condition being treated.¹ Research into the effectiveness and safety of medicinal cannabis for treating various conditions is ongoing.²

What are the side effects? ^{2,3}

- Nausea and vomiting
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness
- Dry mouth
- Confusion
- Hallucination
- Loss of balance
- Decreased memory and concentration
- Anxiety

THC, one of the common active ingredients in medicinal cannabis, causes impairment in drivers.¹ Hence, driving is not recommended while taking medicinal cannabis. It is not known what dose of THC will cause impairment in the majority of people.¹

Who would not be suitable? ²

- Current or past problems with mental illness (including anxiety and depression)
- Unstable heart disease
- Pregnant or breastfeeding women

How much does it cost?

There are currently no medicinal cannabis products subsidised by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), hence, patients will need to pay for the cost themselves. The cost is dependent on the type of product and the dose advised by your doctor.¹

How can patients access it?

Medicinal cannabis is a highly regulated drug in Australia, and its use and supply is controlled by a number of Commonwealth, state and territory laws.⁴

Only medical doctors i.e. specialists and GPs (not patients) can apply to Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) to assist patients in accessing medicinal cannabis.² Your doctor may be able to help you access it (if you are a suitable candidate) as an unapproved drug through the Special Access Scheme or Authorised Prescriber Scheme run by the Australian Government Department of Health.² However, access may still be restricted in some states and territories.² Another means to access medicinal cannabis is through a clinical trial.²

Emerald Clinics is a specialist referral service for patients who are candidates for a therapeutic trial of medical cannabis staffed by trained multidisciplinary clinical teams.

Further information about Emerald Clinics:

<https://www.emeraldclinics.com.au/>

Further information

- **Guidance for the use of medicinal cannabis in Australia: patient information**

<https://www.tga.gov.au/publication/guidance-use-medicinal-cannabis-australia-patient-information>

References

1. Better Health Channel. Medicinal cannabis [Internet]. Melbourne VIC; 2019 [updated 2019 Feb; cited 2019 Apr 11]. Available from: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/medicinal-cannabis>
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4. Communications Directorate. Medicinal cannabis. WA (AU): Department of Health; 2016. 2 p. [cited 2019 Apr 11]. Available from: https://healthywa.wa.gov.au/~/_/media/Files/HealthyWA/Original/Factsheets/medicinal-cannabis-fact-sheet-v2.pdf