

Medicinal cannabis / medicinal cannabinoids.

Please note: The information given on this page is not medical advice and should not be relied on in this way. Individuals wanting medical advice on this issue should consult a health professional.

What is medicinal cannabis / medicinal cannabinoids?

Medicinal cannabis are cannabis preparations prescribed to relieve the symptoms of a medical condition, such as epilepsy. It is a quality-controlled product with specific levels of cannabinoids such as THC and CBD.

For some people suffering from chronic or terminal illnesses, conventional medicines do not work, or do not work as effectively as medicinal cannabis. Also, for some patients, conventional medicines may work but cause debilitating side effects that cannabis can help to relieve.

What are cannabinoids?

The endocannabinoid system is a communication system that plays an important role in the human brain and body.^{1,2} It uses chemical messengers called endocannabinoids along with a system of receptors in the brain and body, to affect things like a person’s mood, memory, sleep and appetite. Components of the cannabis plant, called phytocannabinoids, work by interacting with our body’s endocannabinoid system.

The Lambert Initiative for Cannabinoid Therapeutics at the University of Sydney recognises two major endocannabinoids produced by our bodies and eleven phytocannabinoids that they are actively studying.³ Research has found that the cannabis plant produces between 80 and 100 cannabinoids and about 300 non-cannabinoid chemicals.

It is thought that medicinal cannabis can treat various illness by acting on the endocannabinoid system. Research is ongoing into how cannabinoids can treat or assist in the treatment of various illnesses.

Types and forms of medicinal cannabis

There are two main forms of cannabis that can be used medicinally:

- Pharmaceutical cannabis products that are approved by an organisation such as the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), including nabiximols (Sativex®).⁴ Sativex, which comes as a nasal or oral spray, has been approved in over 24 countries for treating spasticity due to multiple sclerosis.
- Imported products from Canada or Europe, such as cannabis extracts in oils or tinctures.
- Controlled and standardised herbal cannabis (plant products), such as the products produced in the Netherlands.

Why smoking cannabis for medical purposes is not recommended

Smoking is a particularly harmful way of taking cannabis, mainly because carcinogenic substances are inhaled directly into the lungs. Smoking cannabis is not recommended by health authorities.⁵

It is understood that smoked cannabis will not be prescribed in Australia in part because a significant amount of cannabinoid content is lost during combustion, making it difficult to monitor the cannabinoid amount a patient has actually ingested. Additionally, evidence indicates that smoking in general has adverse health effects.⁴

Side effects

As with other medicines, although cannabis may be a successful treatment for some people it will not be a successful treatment for every person. Although it is impossible to die from a cannabis overdose it can still have unpleasant side effects for some people who take it. These side effects may include things like dizziness, light-headedness, and persistent drowsiness.⁶

Special Access Scheme

Under the TGA Special Access Scheme, some forms of medicinal cannabis are currently available. The scheme provides for the import and supply of an unapproved therapeutic good to individual patients on a case-by-case basis. Recently, the TGA has made changes to its Special Access Scheme that will make it easier for medical practitioners to prescribe cannabis-based medicines for patients in need, under certain conditions.

For more information on access to medicinal cannabis, go to tga.gov.au/medicinal-cannabis-guidance-documents

Current situation

The Commonwealth Government controls all regulatory aspects of the cultivation of cannabis for medicinal purposes through one national scheme. Manufacture is a joint responsibility between the Commonwealth and the states and territories. Access to any cannabis products manufactured under the scheme will also be a joint responsibility, with supply being controlled by provisions under the Therapeutic Goods Act 1989 working in tandem with state and territory drugs and poisons legislation.

For more information on Australian federal legislation, go to odc.gov.au/qa

Victoria

The Office of Medicinal Cannabis has been established within the Department of Health and Human Services and provides advice on access to medicinal cannabis in Victoria.

Read more about the Victorian situation at www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/drugs-and-poisons/medicinal-cannabis

New South Wales

The NSW Government has established the Centre for Medicinal Cannabis Research and Innovation to further the understanding of cannabis and cannabis products for therapeutic purposes, and support evidence-based innovation.

Read more about the NSW situation at medicinalcannabis.nsw.gov.au/

Queensland

Queensland is making the use of approved medicinal cannabis products possible as a treatment for certain conditions when the patient has already tried the conventional treatments available for their condition or symptoms, and these have failed or cause intolerable side-effects.

Read more about the QLD situation at www.qld.gov.au/health/conditions/all/medicinal-cannabis.

South Australia

Medical practitioners in South Australia can legally prescribe medicinal cannabis products with Commonwealth and relevant state approvals.

Read more about the SA situation at industryandskills.sa.gov.au/industry/office-of-industrial-hemp-and-medicinal-cannabis.

Western Australia

Doctors can prescribe and pharmacists can dispense medicinal cannabis in Western Australia.

Read more about the situation in Western Australia at healthywa.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Cannabis.

Tasmania

The Tasmanian Government has developed a medical cannabis controlled access scheme (CAS). The scheme will allow relevant medical specialists to be authorised to prescribe medical cannabis (unregistered cannabinoid products) in limited circumstances where conventional treatment has been unsuccessful.

Read more about the situation in Tasmania at premier.tas.gov.au/releases/medical_cannabis_controlled_access_scheme_to_open_on_september_1.

Australian Capital Territory

Cannabis products can be prescribed as Schedule 8 controlled medicines in the ACT for medicinal uses.

Read more about the situation in ACT at health.act.gov.au/health-professionals/pharmaceutical-services/controlled-medicines/medical-cannabis.

Northern Territory

A patient living in the Northern Territory must access medicines containing cannabinoids through a Northern Territory doctor who is authorised under the Special Access or Authorised Prescriber Schemes administered by the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

Read more about the situation in the Northern Territory at health.nt.gov.au/professionals/environmental-health/therapeutic-medicines-containing-cannabinoids-medicinal-cannabis

References

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2. Murillo-Rodriguez, E., Pastrana-Trejo, J.C., Salas-Crisostomo, M., de-la-Cruz, M. 2017. The Endocannabinoid System Modulating Levels of Consciousness, Emotions and Likely Dream Contents. CNS & Neurological Disorders – Drug Targets, vol.16, no.4, pp. 370-379. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2174/1871527316666170223161908>
3. Lambert Initiative for Cannabinoid Therapeutics. Phytocannabinoids. University of Sydney.
4. Therapeutic Goods Administration. (2018). Guidance for the use of medicinal cannabis in Australia: Patient information: The side effects of medicinal cannabis treatment
5. Health Department, Australian Government. (2016). Narcotic Drug Amendment Bill 2016 public information paper.
6. Nugent, SM., Morasco, BJ., O’Neil, ME., Freeman, M., Low, A., Kondo, K., Elven, C., Zakher, B., Motu’apuaka, M., Paynter, R., Kansagara, D. 2017. The Effects of Cannabis Among Adults with Chronic Pain and an Overview of General Harms: A Systematic Review. Annals of Internal Medicine, vol.167, no.5, pp.319-331.

Always call an ambulance on triple zero (000) if an overdose is suspected: tell the paramedic exactly what has been taken. Paramedics are there to help and will not involve the police unless there is a danger to themselves or others.

Other help, support services and resources

Links to further help and support • adf.org.au/help-support/

Information on different types of cannabis • adf.org.au/insights/various-cannabis-use/

● **Further information**

DrugInfo • 1300 85 85 84

Free confidential information and advice about alcohol and other drugs (9am - 5pm, Mon-Fri)

Family Drug Help • 1300 660 068 • www.familydrughelp.com.au (Victorian-based)

Services are available to support those around you who may be affected by your drug use. As well as providing understanding, they can provide information about how best to help during treatment.

Family Drug Support • 1300 368 186 • www.fds.org.au (Australia-wide)



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