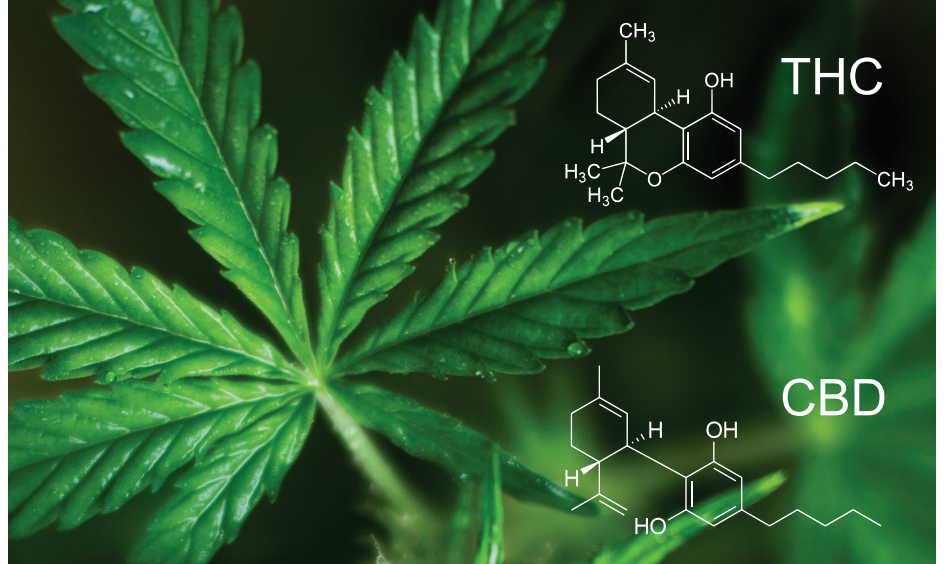


## FACT SHEET

# Medicinal Cannabis



Medicinal cannabis, also known as medicinal marijuana, has received much attention over the last few years. Its use and acceptance in treating a variety of conditions continues to evolve, along with research to support its use in a medical context.

Several studies have found the most common reason patients turn to medical cannabis is for the treatment of chronic pain.<sup>1</sup> While research into this area is in its infancy, studies to date have shown that medicinal cannabis can be beneficial in treating some types of chronic pain.<sup>2</sup> The available evidence supports that medicinal cannabis may be suited to alleviating pain, but there are still limited clinical findings on its effectiveness and the dosage requirements necessary to consistently generate this effect.<sup>3</sup> There is also evidence that some patients are replacing conventional pain medications, such as opioids, with cannabis.<sup>4</sup> One study that investigated patients who used medical cannabis for chronic pain found that it was associated with:

- a 64% decrease in opioid use
- better quality of life in patients with chronic pain, and
- fewer medication side effects and medications used.<sup>5</sup>

It is recommended that medicinal cannabis only be used when approved treatments have been tried and have failed to manage conditions and symptoms.<sup>3</sup>

## HISTORY <sup>6</sup>

Cannabis is one of the oldest documented herbal medicines and has been used for at least 5000 years. Around the 1st century, the ancient Chinese used it to treat rheumatic pain, constipation, female reproductive disorders, and malaria. Ancient Indians also used cannabis to relieve headaches, insomnia, gastrointestinal disorders, and as pain relief during childbirth.

Eventually, cannabis spread throughout Europe and the Americas in the mid-19th century, with the United States Dispensary first listing it as a sedative, analgesic and anti-convulsant in 1845. The herbal properties of cannabis grew in popularity and it was not long until it was used to treat a multitude of ailments including headaches and migraines, eye strain, menopause, brain tumours, neuralgia, gastric ulcers, uterine problems, menstrual cramps, chronic inflammation, acute rheumatism, tingling, and to help relieve dental pain. Increased public consumption was a result of the more commercial production of medicines in the late 1800s.

However, the early 20th century saw an overall decline in herbal remedies — including cannabis — as barbiturates, aspirin, and opioids became more mainstream. In addition, the lack of regulation, along with the criminal associations of cannabis use, led to a further decrease in consumption, and its ultimate criminalisation in Australia and many other countries.

Since the 1940s, research and experimentation into cannabis' pharmacological properties continued, which led to some sectors of the medical field advocating to make medicinal cannabis legal.

In 1996, California became the first US state to legalise medicinal cannabis. In 2003, Canada became the first country to legalise medical use of cannabis nationwide.

Many other countries have also legalised medicinal cannabis, including Australia.

Recreational use of cannabis is still illegal throughout Australia.

## HOW DOES MEDICINAL CANNABIS WORK?

It is believed that medicinal cannabis is effective in treating various illnesses by acting upon the body's endocannabinoid system — a communications system in the brain and body that affects mood, memory, sleep, and appetite.<sup>7</sup>

To date, over 100 cannabinoids, which are naturally occurring compounds, have been identified in cannabis.<sup>8</sup> Our body also makes cannabinoids (endocannabinoids); which also act upon the endocannabinoid system.<sup>9</sup> Endocannabinoids are present in our peripheral and central nervous systems where they act to reduce pain.<sup>10</sup>

The two major cannabinoids in cannabis that have been found to have medicinal benefits are delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD).

THC is the compound that has a strong psychoactive effect (i.e. changes the way someone thinks, feels and even behaves) which causes a person to get 'high'.<sup>11</sup> While many are aware of the euphoria, relaxation and sleepiness associated with THC, this compound has also been found to have analgesic (pain relief), anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. In addition, it has been found to prevent or reduce vomiting.<sup>12,13</sup>

CBD on the other hand, is believed to have anti-psychoactive effects which controls or moderates the 'high' caused by THC.<sup>14</sup> It is also thought that CBD may reduce some of the other negative effects caused by THC, such as anxiety.<sup>15</sup>

## RECREATIONAL CANNABIS VS MEDICINAL CANNABIS

Recreational cannabis (marijuana) and medicinal cannabis are both made from the plant *cannabis sativa*.

The two main cannabinoids in cannabis are THC and CBD. Generally, THC is found at higher concentrations than CBD, unless the ratio is altered deliberately.<sup>16</sup>

Medical cannabis products can contain high or low levels of THC or CBD, in various combinations and

with other cannabinoids. The efficacy of cannabis for various medical conditions will depend upon the types and amounts of cannabinoids in the product.<sup>17</sup>

Medicinal cannabis is highly regulated and contains very controlled amounts of THC and CBD, which are known by the doctor when prescribing these medications. With recreational cannabis, the quantities of these components are often unknown, and vary between batches and suppliers depending on the conditions in which the plant was grown, such as soil quality, bacterial and fungal contamination, the use of herbicides, pesticides, insecticides, water, light, soil availability or quality, temperature, bacterial or viral contamination, animal waste, insects, toxic chemicals, active compounds, and heavy metals. There is no guarantee, therefore, of product quality or that the product is free from other toxins, or even contains the components needed to provide a medicinal effect. Cannabis smoke associated with recreational cannabis also contains significant amounts of toxic chemicals, including ammonia, hydrogen cyanide and nitric oxide.<sup>18</sup>

## WHAT DOES MEDICINAL CANNABIS LOOK LIKE?

In Australia, medicinal cannabis may be in the form of: oral capsules or oils, oral lozenges, oral sublingual spray, vapourisation disks, topical cream, vaginal pessaries and vaginal creams.

## POTENTIAL SIDE EFFECTS

Like all prescribed medications, medicinal cannabis can have side effects. The extent of these side effects, however, can vary depending upon the type of medicinal cannabis product used, and between individuals. Generally, the side effects of CBD-rich products are less than those for high-THC products.

The side effects of medicinal cannabis are still being studied. Currently known side effects<sup>20,21,22</sup> include:

- fatigue and sedation
- feelings of euphoria (intense happiness)
- depression
- drowsiness
- vertigo (dizziness)
- difficulty concentrating
- problems with balance
- problems with thinking and memory
- nausea and vomiting
- fever
- increased or decreased appetite
- dry mouth
- diarrhoea
- convulsions
- confusion
- hallucinations
- paranoid delusions
- psychosis
- cognitive distortion (having thoughts that are not true)
- reduced semen quality.<sup>23</sup>

## WHO SHOULD NOT USE MEDICINAL CANNABIS?

Like all other medications, medicinal cannabis is not suitable for everyone. In particular, they are not recommended for patients who: <sup>24</sup>

- have a previous psychotic or concurrent active mood or anxiety disorder
- are pregnant, planning to become pregnant, or breastfeeding
- have unstable cardiovascular disease.

Medicinal cannabis may be more likely to cause negative effects in patients with neurological conditions.<sup>25</sup>

There is also very limited evidence regarding how medicinal cannabis interacts with other medications, so caution is advised if medicinal cannabis is to be taken with other medications and complementary medicines. Talk to your prescribing doctor for guidance.

## PRECAUTIONS

Medical cannabis treatment can impair the driving ability of patients as levels of THC, which is the main psychoactive substance in cannabis, can be detected in urine for a number of days after the last dose. Consequently, anyone taking medicinal cannabis should avoid driving motor vehicles or operating machinery. In Australia, drug-driving is a criminal offence and carries harsh penalties, including heavy financial penalties and the loss of ones' driving licence. Patients taking medicinal cannabis should speak with their doctor to better understand how medicinal cannabis can impair driving and how to effectively undergo treatment, whilst ensuring their safety when driving and compliance with the law. <sup>26</sup>

As there is no guidance available on appropriate or safe doses of medicinal cannabis to effectively treat numerous ailments and their symptoms, it is recommended that caution should be exercised and that initial doses of treatment should be low and, if necessary, slowly increased.

Low start doses are particularly important for people with: <sup>27</sup>

- memory and thinking difficulties
- liver and kidney disease
- weakness and wasting of the body due to severe chronic illness.

## ACCESS

Medicinal cannabis is tightly regulated in Australia and is therefore subject to legal requirements.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) regulates the supply of medicinal cannabis in Australia. Patients cannot obtain medical cannabis directly through the TGA. It can only be accessed through a doctor, who must meet certain requirements, obtain permits, and comply with relevant state laws. The laws surrounding medicinal cannabis vary from state to state and may affect whether a patient can access this type of treatment.

Medicinal cannabis is not kept on our premises. Instead, it is dispensed via the Australian Medicinal Cannabis

Service (AMCS), an external organisation that provides clinical support, product formulation and technology services to medical clinics that are implementing medical cannabis services for their patients.

To obtain access to medicinal cannabis, a patient must be assessed by a doctor and sign the relevant consent and agreement forms. This process will require the patient to complete several questionnaires over the duration of their treatment. Consent will be required from the patient for their information to be shared between Metro Pain Group (for the doctors to treat your condition), AMCS (for the pharmacy to supply the medicinal cannabis) and regulatory bodies. Please refer to our privacy policy for further information.

## COST

Cost for the medicinal cannabis product start from \$375 per month. Cost will vary depending on the dose, frequency of treatment and formulation utilised.

The initial consultation fee with a doctor at Metro Pain Group will be \$300 - \$350. Medicare offer a rebate of \$65 - \$130 for this visit. There will be several review appointments required to monitor the patient's treatment. The cost for review appointments will be \$80 with a Medicare rebate of \$21-60.

DVA, WorkCover and TAC patients are not eligible to claim for medicinal cannabis.

Costs for medicinal cannabis are not subsidised by the Federal Government, so patients are liable for all costs related to the purchase of the product.

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## DISCLAIMER

Please note the contents contained in this Patient Fact Sheet are not intended as a substitute for your own independent health professional's advice, diagnosis or treatment. At Metro Pain Group, we assess every patient's condition individually. As leaders in pain intervention, we aim to provide advanced, innovative, and evidence-based treatments tailored to suit each patient. As such, recommended treatments and their outcomes will vary from patient to patient. If you would like to find out whether our treatments are suitable for your specific condition, please speak to one of our doctors at the time of your consultation.

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