

# Is Medical Marijuana Right For You?

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# Preface

For myself, my family, my friends and clients, I am committed to keeping informed and educated about the (Canadian) Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations (ACMPR).

The information provided in this booklet is intended to assist you in understanding the therapeutic benefits and potential drawbacks of medical cannabis. However, the opinions I express and the following information is not medical advice and should never replace the guidance of your doctor.



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## Introduction

Cannabis, also known as marijuana has been used for thousands of years in central Asia. It has been smoked for over a century in America, gaining wide usage during the counterculture of the 1960's, and since then.

It has been the most used illicit drug in America, if not the world at large.

Both strength and potency have increased greatly through advances in genetic manipulation and growth conditions (hydroponics). The marijuana of today can be as much as 15 times stronger than what the drug was in the 1960's and 70's.

In the last decade, the world view of marijuana has shifted. More and more people are looking to medical marijuana for relief.

*Did you know that the first published medical use of cannabis dates back to 1842?*

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# Important Terms to Understand

Medical marijuana refers to the use of cannabis and its constituent cannabinoids, primarily tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD), as a medical therapy to treat or alleviate symptoms.

**THC** is the main therapeutic component of cannabis and is responsible for the psychoactive effects of cannabis. Research has linked THC to the following properties: analgesic; antiemetic (a drug that is effective against vomiting and nausea); appetite stimulant; anti-spastic. Conversely, strains of marijuana with high proportions of THC may cause feelings of anxiety, disorientation and intoxication.

**Cannabidiol (CBD)** has a strong role in therapies for pain and inflammation. Research has linked CBD to the following properties: anti-inflammatory; neuroprotective; anxiolytic (anxiety agent); anti-seizure; antipsychotic. According to Health Canada, the average patient's daily consumption of medical cannabis is 1–3 grams. Patients are advised to start with a very low dose as the effects of THC can vary from person to person based on potency and individual physiology.

A typical “joint” represents 0.5 grams of cannabis. However, one does not need to smoke cannabis to receive the therapeutic benefits. In fact, many Canadians now prefer the use of a vaporizer to inhale medical cannabis or ingest it in the form of oil, edibles or elixirs.

**Vaporizing** is an effective alternative to smoking which provides the same therapeutic effect while reducing exposure to harmful compounds resulting from the combustion of plant matter. Vaporizing requires a special device called a vaporizer (sometimes called a nebulizer) which can vary in size and features. Patients grind up their whole-flower cannabis (or they can order it granulated). Vaporization heats the marijuana up to a point where the essential oils are released while avoiding the burning of plant matter. When inhaling cannabis, the onset of effects is within minutes. The duration of effects is shorter with inhalation than with ingestion. Generally, effects last 2-4 hours, and in some cases up to 6 hours.

**Ingestion** is the preferred choice for some. Marijuana can be eaten by baking it into edible forms or by using cannabis oils. Consuming cannabis oil provides a more precise dosing option. Cannabis oils are gaining in popularity for people who need relief over a longer period of time (for example through the night). For patients with breathing problems resulting from conditions like asthma, chronic bronchitis or emphysema, consuming cannabis oil is a welcome alternative from vapor or smoke.

The duration of the effects can last 6–10 hours when cannabis is eaten. Understanding the differences between inhalation and ingestion is very important. “Start low and go slow” is the approach recommended by licensed, Canadian producers.

When starting marijuana for medical purposes, one may wish to start with a low THC strain and increase gradually if needed. The therapeutic effectiveness should be monitored until the optimal strain is selected.

Currently, Canada does not allow the sale of marijuana food products, even for medical use, but individuals who have a prescription for medical marijuana can cook with cannabis at home. Baking cannabis oil into muffins, pancakes and cupcakes has become popular among those who do not wish to smoke.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## How do you know what strain of Medical Marijuana is right for you?

**Strain Selection:** The psychoactive effects of THC can vary from patient to patient based on strain potency and individual physiology.

Sativa strains are almost exclusively THC dominant. Although Indica strains can also be high in THC, the therapeutic effects of THC are consistently found in Sativa strains. Some effects associated with Sativa strains include: mental focus; head “high” making it better for daytime use.

Indica strains can contain higher levels of CBD and more balanced mixtures of CBD and THC. Although not all Indicas are CBD dominant, the therapeutic effects of CBD are typically found in Indica strains. Effects associated with Indica strains include: sleepiness, body “high” making it better for nighttime use.

Hybrids are created by breeding two strains of cannabis together, where one strain is, in some part, Indica and the other is, in some part, Sativa. Hybrid strains offer effects associated with both Sativa and Indica.

Each person is unique. Licensed producers of medical marijuana have yield guides to assist with the selection and combination of the diverse strains of cannabis that may be right for you.

The potential effects associated with cannabis may vary depending on the amount of cannabis used, the concentration of cannabinoids (THC / CBD) in the product, the patient’s age and medical condition and the use of other prescription or non-prescription drugs.

## **Where can you legally obtain marijuana?**

Licensed Producers authorized by Health Canada are the only legal source of medical cannabis. Medical cannabis bought from a licensed producer is similar to a prescription bought in a pharmacy. It is a legal medicine that has been prescribed by a doctor.

## **How is your information and privacy protected?**

Licensed producers are subject to laws governing how your personal health information can be collected, used, stored and disclosed. In general, personal information can only be used for the purposes for which it was collected and it cannot be disclosed without your explicit consent. Each licensed producer is required to also have its own privacy policies and procedures and must identify a privacy officer who is responsible for compliance with this legislation. You can speak directly to the privacy officer to confirm any details you are concerned about.

## **How do you know you are getting safe, quality marijuana?**

In Canada, Medical Cannabis is grown according to Good Production Practices (GPP), and subjected to regular and rigorous government quality and regulatory audits. Testing for impurities (e.g. fungus, bacteria, heavy metals, and pesticides) is conducted to guarantee safety of all products. Products are sold in child-resistant containers.

## **Is your medical marijuana tax deductible?**

Medical marijuana from licensed producers is an allowable medical expense on personal federal taxes.

## What about Cannabis in the Workplace?

For many employers, medical cannabis is a new concept and they may not have policies in place to address it specifically. However, medical cannabis is a legal medication prescribed by your doctor, so you should feel confident discussing it with your employer. Having said that, a prescription is not permission to be impaired at work and employees using medical cannabis need to be treated the same as others on medication that affects their ability to do the work safely or effectively (such as opioids).

## Is medical marijuana covered by your Health Insurance Plan?

Medical cannabis is becoming a more recognized and accepted medical therapy, and some insurance companies have started providing coverage for it. Canada's Armed Forces Veterans, for example, have access to insurance coverage.

However, most insurance companies do not cover medical cannabis yet. A better understanding of cannabis will likely lead to greater acceptance, and ultimately to greater coverage by insurance companies and governments. For this reason, many licensed producers have become involved in cannabis research, including clinical trials.

## Who should not use Cannabis?

According to Health Canada, cannabis should not be used if: you are under the age of 25; if you are allergic to smoke; have serious liver, kidney, heart or lung disease; have a personal or family history of serious mental disorders such as schizophrenia, psychosis, or bipolar disorder; are pregnant or breast feeding; or have a history of alcohol or drug abuse.

## Driving Laws and Medicinal Marijuana

It is illegal to drive while impaired. The challenge is that having THC in your system, the active ingredient in marijuana, may mean someone is too impaired to drive – or it may not.

Several of Canada's licensed producers are funding national campaigns to raise awareness about the dangers of driving while under the influence of marijuana. As one example, Canopy Growth Corporation will provide funding over three years to the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition and Mothers against Drunk Driving Canada to develop and administer the campaign.

## Travel with Prescription Marijuana

The Canadian Air Transport Security Authority (CATSA) tells people travelling with prescription cannabis to be prepared to show medical documentation. Screening officers are obliged to call police to verify the paperwork. While passengers may carry their medical marijuana in their checked luggage, CATSA recommends they carry all medication in their carry-on.

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# How Cannabis May Help You

## Alcohol Withdrawal

Marijuana may help people while trying to stop drinking alcohol. Marijuana is safer than alcohol and much less addictive. It does not cause as much physical damage as alcohol. Research shows that some people use marijuana as a less harmful substitute for alcohol, prescription drugs, and other illegal drugs.

## Alzheimer's disease

Marijuana may be able to slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease, according to a study led by Kim Janda of the Scripps Research Institute. The 2006 study, published in the journal *Molecular Pharmacology*, found that THC, one of the active chemicals in marijuana, slows the formation of amyloid plaques by stopping the enzyme in the brain responsible for their creation.

## Arthritis

A study published in the journal *Rheumatology* from Dr. Sheng- Ming Dai of China's Second Military Medical University found that CB2 receptors are found in unusually high levels in the joint tissue of arthritis patients. The use of cannabis is shown to fight inflammation in the joints by activating the pathways of CB2 receptors. Canadian researcher Dr. Jason McDougall, a professor of pharmacology and anesthesia at Dalhousie University in Halifax, has undertaken a new study to find out if medical marijuana can help repair arthritic joints and relieve pain. The study is supported by the Arthritis Society and is investigating if cannabis is not just dampening the pain in the brain, but also working to fight inflammation and repair the joint itself.

## Auto-Immune Diseases

Medical marijuana is being used to treat Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (Lupus). This is a condition where the body starts attacking itself for reasons not known by the medical community. Some compounds in marijuana seem to have a calming effect on the immune system, and many suggest that this may be how it helps deal with symptoms of Lupus. Reduction of pain and nausea.

## Cancer (Metastatic)

It is said that a chemical in marijuana prevents cancer from spreading. Researchers at the California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco noted that CBD may help to stop the spread of cancer cells. Cannabidiol prevents cancer cells from spreading by turning off a gene called Id-1. The study, published in the journal *Molecular Cancer Therapeutics*, found that cancer cells replicate this gene far more than non-cancerous cells.

Researchers studied breast cancer cells that had high levels of Id-1 and treated them with cannabidiol. Treatment has been shown to offer relief. The cells had decreased Id-1 levels and spread less aggressively.

## Chemotherapy (Side-Effects)

Medical marijuana users claim the drug helps relieve pain and suppresses nausea, the two main reasons it is often used to reduce the side effects of chemotherapy. In 2010, researchers at Harvard Medical School suggested that some of the drug's benefits may be that it reduces anxiety, which would improve the patient's mood and act as a sedative in small doses.

## Concussion

Some evidence shows that marijuana can help heal the brain after a concussion or other traumatic brain injury. Harvard professor emeritus of psychiatry and marijuana advocate, Lester Grinspoon, recently wrote a letter to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, saying that the NFL should stop testing players for marijuana and start funding research into marijuana's ability to protect the brain from damage and injury. "Already, many doctors and researchers believe that marijuana has incredibly powerful neuroprotective properties, an understanding based on both laboratory and clinical data," he writes. Goodell recently stated that he'd be willing to allow athletes to use marijuana if medical research showed that it is an effective neuroprotective agent.

## Creativity

Marijuana spurs creativity in the brain. Contrary to “stoner” stereotypes, marijuana usage has been shown to have some positive mental effects with regard to creativity. Researchers have discovered that marijuana improves verbal fluency. An increase in creative ability may be due to the release of dopamine in the brain, reducing inhibitions and allowing the brain to perceive things differently.

## Diaphragm Spasms

Other types of muscle spasms are treated with marijuana use as well. In his documentary “Weed”, neurosurgeon Dr. Sanjay Gupta interviewed a teenager named Chaz who was using medical marijuana to treat diaphragm spasms that were untreatable by other, prescribed and powerful, medications. His condition, called myoclonus diaphragmatic flutter (also known as Leeuwenhoek’s Disease), causes repetitive spasms in the abdominal region which are not only painful but also affect breathing and speaking. Smoking marijuana was shown to calm the attacks almost immediately.

## Eye Disease

Marijuana can be used for both treatment and prevention of glaucoma. This disease increases pressure in the eyeball and damages the optic nerves causing loss of vision. Using marijuana reduces the pressure inside the eye, according to the National Eye Institute: “Studies in the early 1970s showed that marijuana, when inhaled, lowered intraocular pressure (IOP) in people with normal pressure and those with glaucoma.” These effects may slow the progression of the disease, preventing blindness.

## Hepatitis C (treatments)

Treatment side effects for hepatitis C infection may be very challenging to deal with. Negative side effects include fatigue, nausea, muscle aches, loss of appetite, and depression. Many people who start this treatment are unable to finish it because of the intolerable side effects. Marijuana, however, has been shown to offer relief. A 2006 study published in the European Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology found that 86% of patients using marijuana completed their hep C treatment, while only 29% of non-users completed their treatment.

Cannabis seemed to improve the effectiveness of the treatment: 54% of hep C patients smoking marijuana kept their viral levels low, in comparison to only 8% of nonsmokers.

## HIV/AIDS:

Not only does cannabis reduce symptoms and side effects, it has also demonstrated some promise as an inhibitor of HIV/AIDS progression.

The importance of mental health is oftentimes swept under the rug in today's society. The symptoms of HIV/AIDS can take a heavy toll on patients as physical discomfort converts to emotional anguish. Depression, anxiety, and stress continue to feed physiological deterioration, and yet the euphoric relief associated with cannabis consumption has been pushed into the realm of taboo.

## Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Studies suggest that patients who suffer from diseases such as Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis benefit from the use of marijuana. In 2010, University of Nottingham researchers found that chemicals in marijuana, including THC and cannabidiol, interact with cells in the body that play a significant role in gut function and immune responses. The study was reported in the *Journal of Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics*.

THC-like compounds made by the body increase the permeability of the intestines, allowing bacteria easy access. The plant-derived cannabinoids in marijuana stop these body-made cannabinoids. Marijuana relieves pain, reduces inflammation, and helps with sleep.

## Multiple Sclerosis

A study published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* suggests that marijuana can ease painful symptoms of multiple sclerosis. Jody Corey-Bloom, a physician, studied 30 multiple sclerosis patients with painful contractions in their muscles. The patients did not respond to other treatments. After inhaling marijuana for a couple of days, they were in far less pain.

The THC attaches to receptors in the muscles and nerves to relieve pain. Other studies suggest that the chemical also helps control the muscle spasms.

## Pain

Researchers from rheumatology units at several medical centres gave their patients Sativex, a cannabinoid-based pain-relieving medicine, and after a two-week period, people on Sativex had a significant reduction in pain and an improved sleep quality compared to placebo users. Some patients including those in extreme pain respond well to the therapeutic benefit of THC. Patients report decreases in their reliance on opioids, and important increases in their quality of life as their cannabis therapy progresses.

## Palliative Care

Dr. Vincent Maida, a palliative care specialist in Toronto says most hospitals in Canada do not have plans to begin administering medical marijuana. Instead, they rely on narcotic drugs such as OxyContin, morphine and fentanyl -- drugs that carry harsh side effects including drowsiness and constipation. These drugs are also often misused or end up on the streets, causing untold damage, said Maida. Despite recent research that has shown that adding medical marijuana to a palliative pain care plan will cut the need for medication, there remains a significant amount of stigma and fear mongering over medical marijuana. Physician Neil M. Flynn wrote that for terminally ill patients, marijuana can make the difference between exercising control over their final months and passing in relative peace and comfort, or dying in constant and severe agony.

## Parkinson's disease

Research has shown that inhaling marijuana significantly reduces pain sensations and tremors. It improves sleep for patients with Parkinson's disease. Fine motor skills are also improved. The Israeli government has accepted the use of marijuana as medicine, and has gone ahead to funding research.

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – (P.T.S.D.)

Many people, including veterans, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder find relief from medical marijuana.

Marijuana can disturb sleep cycles by interrupting the later stages of REM sleep. This may be a serious grievance for frequent users. However, for people suffering from severe nightmares, this effect can provide relief. Nightmares occur during those same stages of sleep. By interrupting REM sleep, nightmares are minimized. Research showed a very significant decline in the number of nightmares in patients who have PTSD.

## Seizure Disorders

Dr. Robert J. DeLorenzo, of Virginia Commonwealth University, gave marijuana extract and synthetic marijuana to epileptic rats. The drugs rid the mice of seizures for 10 hours. Cannabinoids like the active ingredients in marijuana, tetrahydrocannabinol, control seizures by binding to the brain cells responsible for controlling excitability and regulating relaxation. These discoveries have been published in the Journal of Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics. Marijuana also reduces the symptoms of a severe seizure disorder called Dravet's Syndrome. During the research for his documentary "Weed," Dr. Sanjay Gupta interviewed a family, who treats their five year-old daughter by using a medical marijuana strain high in cannabidiol and low in THC. Their daughter has Dravet's Syndrome, which causes seizures and severe developmental delays. According to the documentary, the drug has decreased her seizures from almost 300 a week to just one every seven days. About forty other children in the state are using the same strain of marijuana to treat their seizures, and it seems to be working quite well. Doctors who recommended this treatment say the cannabidiol in the plant interacts with brain cells to quiet the excessive processes in the brain that results in these seizures.

## Sleep

Frequent use of marijuana can interrupt sleep. Other drugs including alcohol have worse effects on sleep.

## Stroke

Marijuana may help protect the brain after a stroke. Research from the University of Nottingham shows that marijuana may help safeguard the brain from damage caused by a stroke by reducing the size of the area affected. Other research has shown neuroprotective effects from cannabis.

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## Weight

Studies in the American Journal of Medicine suggested that “pot” smokers lose more weight than the average person and eventually have a healthier metabolism and reaction to sugars, even though they may end up eating a lot more calories due to the “munchies”. Data from more than 4,500 Americans was analyzed, 579 of whom had smoked in the last month. Approximately 2,000 had used marijuana in the past, while about 2,000 had never used the drug. They studied their body’s response to consuming sugars. Not only are marijuana users thinner, but their bodies had a healthier response to sugar. In contrast, for patients undergoing cancer treatment, marijuana stimulates appetite. Often, patients undergoing chemotherapy find relief from nausea and pain when treated with cannabinoid drugs that contain THC.

# Conclusion

The sheer volume of information available about cannabis can feel overwhelming. If you would like to keep up to date on the latest findings or have a specific question to ask, please write to me at: [sherry@bayviewconcierge.ca](mailto:sherry@bayviewconcierge.ca)

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## Resources

### Websites

Click blue links to visit websites.

- The Arthritis Society: [arthritis.ca](http://arthritis.ca)
- Aphria: [aphria.com](http://aphria.com)
- Cannabis Canada: [cann-can.ca](http://cann-can.ca)
- CanniMed: [cannimed.ca](http://cannimed.ca)
- Canopy Growth Inc.: [canopygrowth.com](http://canopygrowth.com)
- Health Canada: [hc-sc.gc.ca](http://hc-sc.gc.ca)
- MedReLeaf: [medreleaf.com](http://medreleaf.com)
- Mettrum: [mettrum.com](http://mettrum.com)
- RCMP: [rcmp-grc.gc.ca/ts-sr/id-cfa-eng.htm](http://rcmp-grc.gc.ca/ts-sr/id-cfa-eng.htm)

### Documentaries

- Dr. Sanjay Gupta's CNN special "[Weed](#)"