

Medical Cannabinoids in Palliative Care

What are medical cannabinoids?

Cannabinoids are types of chemicals naturally found in the plant Cannabis. The 2 most well-known cannabinoid chemicals are called tetra-hydro-cannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD). There are more than 100 different cannabinoids. Some people use cannabinoids recreationally and some use them to treat health problems.

- The amount of THC and CBD chemical 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 are a lot of options for treating health problems. It is recommended that you receive standard treatments before thinking about trying medical cannabinoids as there is very little science behind their use.
- No human research has shown that cannabinoids can stop cancer from growing.

Medical Cannabinoids can be taken in the form of:

- **Manufactured cannabinoid products:** Sprays or capsules/pills. These are only available with a prescription from a doctor or nurse practitioner and from a standard pharmacy. Often called “prescription or pharmaceutical cannabinoids,” these are sold under the brand names: Cesamet or Sativex.
- **Plant-based medical cannabis/marijuana:** Dried plants for smoking or vaping; oils available in liquid or gel capsule form.

How are medical cannabinoids different from retail (recreational) cannabis/marijuana?

Medical cannabinoids have strict dose regulations. This makes them safer because “you know what you are getting.” because “you know what you are getting.” Medical cannabinoids that are “manufactured” may be covered by private or provincial drug plans, and some may be eligible as a health expense on income tax returns.

Will medical cannabinoids work for me?

Right now, there is very little high-quality research about the use of medical cannabinoids and long-term effects. Based on the best research so far, cannabinoids may help to reduce the following symptoms (especially when used with proven treatments):

- Nausea and vomiting cause by chemotherapy (and sometimes appetite loss in palliative care).
- Muscle spasticity caused by multiple sclerosis (MS) or spinal cord injury.
- Nerve pain.
- Cancer pain in palliative care.

Which medical cannabinoid is right for me?

Check with your health care provider to see about the safest options for you—especially if you are on medications. They will discuss your options based on your needs and safety.

Do not change your dose or brand unless you speak with your health care provider first.

What are the side effects I might experience taking cannabinoids?

Common side effects of cannabinoids include (mostly from THC):

- Low blood pressure (hypotension)
- Confusion/disorientation
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Feeling “high” or very happy/excited
- Feeling sedated or unhappy
- Feeling disconnected from reality
- Memory problems
- Muscle twitching
- Numbness
- Trouble speaking

Are there any reasons why I should not try cannabinoids?

- If you have an illness that might put you at risk, for example: heart condition (unstable angina, recent heart attack) or low blood pressure.
- If you have a history of psychosis.
- If you are an older adult, are frail, or have a history of dementia/delirium.

Safety

Even if you have been authorized to use cannabis or another drug by a health care provider, do not drive or operate equipment after taking any cannabinoid product. Check with your provincial ministry of transport for specific recommendations and laws about driving and cannabinoid use.

Caution: Avoid buying from unlicensed suppliers of cannabis as they are unregulated and you may be at risk of product contamination (e.g., fungus, pesticides, street drugs).

