



# Medicinal cannabis FAQs

## What is cannabis?

Cannabis is made from the dried flowering heads and leaves of a plant called *Cannabis sativa*. Cannabis contains a complex mix of approximately 60 unique 'cannabinoids', along with many other chemical compounds. The main active ingredient responsible for the 'high' produced by cannabis is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Other related substances in cannabis include cannabidiol (CBD) and cannabinol (CBN), each of which has different pharmacological effects.

## What is medicinal cannabis?

Medicinal cannabis is a term that refers to legal, high quality and standardised products prepared under controlled pharmaceutical laboratory conditions from crude or raw cannabis. Crude cannabis is a difficult drug for doctors to prescribe because the dose and potency of the drug in each case is not tested or known.

Pharmaceutical preparations of cannabis use modified active components of cannabis in medical formulations, which maximise the therapeutic benefit and minimise side effects. Pharmaceutical preparations, such as a tablet, capsule or spray, mean the dose and strength of the product can be controlled and standardised.

## What is the difference between medicinal and recreational cannabis?

Medicinal cannabis is legally produced under strict pharmaceutical conditions. Doctors and pharmacists know exactly what the medicine contains.

The ingredients, potency and quality of illicit recreational cannabis are untested. Contamination with microbes, pesticides and heavy metals can occur.

In Australia, medicinal cannabis products are most commonly available as oils, sprays, tinctures and capsules. Doses are usually taken orally or sublingually (under the tongue).

By contrast, illicit cannabis is usually smoked. Smoking is a harmful way of using cannabis. People who smoke cannabis frequently have the same breathing problems as those who smoke tobacco.

These differences mean recreational cannabis cannot be described as being 'medicinal cannabis'.

## What are the benefits of medicinal cannabis?

Currently, the scientific basis for using medicinal cannabis is limited. There is some evidence it may be useful in the following conditions:

- Treating certain childhood epilepsies
- Treating spasticity and pain in multiple sclerosis
- Treating chronic non-cancer pain
- Relieving chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting

For more information on the use of medicinal cannabis in these and other conditions visit: [TGA \(external site\)](#)

## What are the side effects of medicinal cannabis?

As with many other medicines, medicinal cannabis can cause unwanted side effects. These side effects include nausea and vomiting, changes in appetite, diarrhoea, drowsiness, dizziness, loss of balance, difficulty with concentration and problems with thinking and memory.



## **Can I drive if I am using cannabis?**

Any product that contains cannabis can impair attention and concentration, which affects a person's fitness to drive and operate machinery. Studies have shown a significant proportion of drivers involved in road crashes test positive for cannabis.

It is recommended people using medicinal cannabis do not drive. Patients are advised to discuss this with their doctor.

In WA, it is an offence to drive with THC present in your system, regardless of whether the THC comes from prescribed legal medicinal cannabis or illicit recreational cannabis.

## **What is the current legal status of medicinal cannabis?**

In February 2016, the Australian Government amended the Narcotics Drugs Act 1967 to allow cultivation of cannabis for medicinal or scientific purposes only. Growers and manufacturers must meet strict rules to obtain a licence.

## **Can I grow my own medicinal cannabis legally?**

No, personal or home cultivation of cannabis for use in medical conditions or recreationally is still illegal.

## **Can I now legally smoke cannabis?**

No, the use of cannabis is controlled or prohibited by a number of Commonwealth and State and Territory laws. As it is still illegal to use recreational cannabis, you cannot claim that smoking cannabis is for 'medicinal' purposes.

## **How can I access medicinal cannabis in WA?**

Any doctor in WA can prescribe medicinal cannabis if they believe the treatment is suitable for you and they have the required Commonwealth and State approvals. The first step is to discuss medicinal cannabis with your general practitioner or specialist. An approved prescription can be dispensed at any pharmacy.

## **Is there a list of doctors who prescribe medicinal cannabis?**

No, in WA any medical practitioner can prescribe medicinal cannabis if they believe it is clinically appropriate and they have the necessary Commonwealth and State approvals.

## **What approvals are required?**

Most medicinal cannabis products are not registered with the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). This means doctors have to obtain approval from the TGA prior to prescribing these products. For more information visit: [TGA \(external site\)](#)

Any medicinal cannabis product containing THC is a Schedule 8 medicine. There are rules doctors must follow when prescribing all Schedule 8 medicines. For most patients, treatment with medicinal cannabis can be initiated by their general practitioner.

## **How much does medicinal cannabis cost?**

Medicinal cannabis products are not funded under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). Costs vary from one product to another.

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

Produced by the Communications  
Directorate © Department of Health 2019