

Medicinal cannabis products.

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Since 2016, medicinal cannabis has been available via prescription in Australia. And legal access continues to grow.¹

Medicinal cannabis products can be prescribed for a range of health conditions and should only be prescribed where clinically appropriate and when other treatments have been unsuccessful.

Only two medicinal cannabis products have been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for use. All other products are 'unapproved' which means that they have not been assessed for safety, quality, or effectiveness.²

While there's a lot of interest in medicinal cannabis, there's quite a bit of confusion about it too. Here, we'll explore some of the more common questions.

MEDICINAL CANNABIS USE IN AUSTRALIA

As of 2022-23, approximately 700,000 Australians were estimated to use cannabis for medicinal reasons.¹

In 2019, only 3.9% of Australians who used cannabis for medical purposes in the past year had reported having a prescription for it (sometimes or always) - but by 2022-23, this had risen to 29.9%.³

The number of prescriber approvals for medicinal cannabis products issued by the TGA has also increased significantly over the same period.⁴

But there isn't data on the exact number of prescriptions, and data showing which conditions medicinal cannabis is being prescribed for is limited. According to one TGA prescribing pathway, medicinal cannabis is most commonly prescribed for:

- chronic pain
- anxiety
- sleep disorders.⁵

Snapshot of cannabis use in Australia^{1, 3, 5, 6}



2.5 million

people used cannabis in the last year.



700,000

people used cannabis for medicinal purposes.



Sourced medicinal cannabis from a doctor:

- always: 150,000 people
- sometimes: 50,000 people.



Most common prescribed conditions:

- chronic non-cancer pain
- anxiety
- sleep disorders.

What is cannabis?

Cannabis is a plant that contains cannabinoids.⁷

Cannabinoids include any drug that acts on the cannabinoid receptors in your body's endocannabinoid system, and any natural or synthetic (lab-made) drug that's made from, or related to, the cannabis plant.⁸

Cannabis plants produce hundreds of cannabinoids, with at least 120 identified so far.⁷

The two main cannabinoids found in cannabis are:

- **delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)**
- **cannabidiol (CBD).**

Some other cannabinoids being studied include:

- cannabigerol (CBG)
- cannabinol (CBN)
- cannabichromene (CBC).⁷

MEDICINAL CANNABIS

The term **medicinal cannabis** refers to using cannabinoids for medical purposes, including to treat or relieve illnesses, health conditions and related symptoms.

It includes both the use of medicinal cannabis products, and the use of illicit cannabis for medicinal reasons.⁹

Medicinal cannabis products are prescribed by a registered health provider.

How do cannabinoids work?

Your body makes its own cannabis-like chemicals, called endocannabinoids - they act on your endocannabinoid system which has receptors throughout your body.^{10, 11}

Endocannabinoids can help regulate functions, including:

- immune system
- mood and emotions
- memory
- sleep and appetite
- pain.^{10, 11}

Cannabinoids also act on these receptors, meaning they can change how your body usually regulates these functions.^{10, 11}

But we don't yet fully understand how this works, or how this may relate to the medicinal effects people report experiencing from cannabis.

Is medicinal cannabis effective?

Overall, the evidence for medicinal cannabis effectiveness is inconsistent and more research is needed.

There is still a lot we don't know about medicinal cannabis, including how effective it is for different conditions, and which products, doses and treatment approaches might work best.¹²

This doesn't necessarily mean medicinal cannabis is ineffective. Rather, it means there isn't enough good quality research yet to know with certainty if it works.

The TGA provides guidance to help understand the evidence around medicinal cannabis. Most research focuses on five health conditions:¹³

EPILEPSY IN CHILDREN

- CBD-only products may reduce treatment-resistant seizures in people aged 2-25 years, when used with other medicines. But there isn't enough research yet to know if it's effective for seizures in adults.
- Not for use as an emergency seizure treatment.

CHRONIC NON-CANCER PAIN

- Medicinal cannabis products can complement traditional treatment in relieving pain in some patients.

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS (MS)

- Cannabis extracts with equal amounts of THC and CBD (nabiximols) might help with MS pain, muscle stiffness, sleep, and bladder symptoms, but it doesn't work for everyone.
- No studies have compared cannabinoids with standard MS treatments, so it shouldn't be the only treatment used for MS.

CHEMO-THERAPY-INDUCED NAUSEA AND VOMITING

- THC products may be effective but should only be used if standard approved treatments have failed.

PALLIATIVE (END-OF-LIFE) CARE

- There's little evidence of benefits for advanced cancer patients with chronic pain. There's also no evidence medicinal cannabis has anti-cancer properties.
- There's no evidence that it's effective in managing the symptoms of AIDS.
- Products should only be used for end-of-life care if no other treatments have worked.

Good quality research is particularly lacking for the treatment of mental health conditions with medicinal cannabis containing THC, such as anxiety and depression.^{14, 15}

For more clinical evidence information visit the TGA's [Medicinal cannabis - guidance documents](#).

Patient experiences

Many people who use medicinal cannabis report that it helps them, including for conditions where evidence is limited.⁹

For example, although evidence of effectiveness for sleep disorders is lacking, sleep is one of the most common reasons medicinal cannabis products are prescribed in Australia.

And, in the Cannabis as Medicine Survey (CAMS) 2022-23, most people using medicinal cannabis for sleep reported improved symptoms.⁹

This gap between patient experience and what the evidence shows is an ongoing challenge. It highlights the need for more research to better understand medicinal cannabis.

The Cannabis as Medicine Survey (CAMS) is run every 2 years. It surveys Australians aged 18 years and over who have used cannabis for medical purposes in the past 12 months. CAMS provides useful information about how medicinal cannabis is being used and people's experiences, but the results aren't representative of everyone who uses medicinal cannabis.

For more information: [Medical cannabis use in Australia seven years after legalisation.](#)

When can medicinal cannabis products be prescribed?

Medicinal cannabis products can only be prescribed for health conditions when other approved treatments have been unsuccessful.¹²

They're not recommended as a first-line treatment for any health condition.

Importantly, there may be additional risks from taking medicinal cannabis containing THC if you:

- have a psychotic, mood or anxiety disorder
- are pregnant, trying to get pregnant or breastfeeding
- have unstable heart disease.¹²

It's important to discuss your full medical history with your doctor to support safe and informed decision-making about your healthcare.



How are medicinal cannabis products used?

Medicinal cannabis products can be used in several different ways. Each method of use will have a different:

- onset time (the time it takes for medication to produce the desired effects)
- duration of effects (how long it lasts)
- consideration for use.

These factors can influence how well medicinal cannabis can manage your symptoms.¹²

If you're prescribed medicinal cannabis, your doctor can guide you on the most appropriate product and method of use based on your condition and treatment goals.

Types and methods of medicinal cannabis use:¹²

Type of use	Products	Onset	Peak	Duration	Considerations
Vaporising	• flower • oil	90 seconds	15-30 minutes	3-4 hours	• provides immediate, short-acting symptom relief • for vaporising flower, people must use a TGA-approved device
Swallowing or eating (oral)	• pill • oil • pastilles	30-90 minutes	2-4 hours	8-24 hours	• provides longer lasting symptom relief • recommended to wait at least 3 hours between doses to avoid possible overdose
Under tongue (oromucosal)	• spray	90 minutes	2-4 hours	8-24 hours	• may be easier for people to use instead of swallowing a pill/oil
On skin (topical)	• lotion • oil • patch	unknown	unknown	unknown	• mainly for CBD or CBN products - THC doesn't absorb well through the skin • some reports of skin rash and itching from these products

Smoking medicinal cannabis is **not** recommended because it's harder to accurately dose, and smoking cannabis can cause health harms.¹²

Note: This table provides general information.

Medicinal cannabis also affects people differently, based on:

- size, weight and health
- whether the person is used to taking it (tolerance)
- whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- the amount taken
- the strength of the drug (varies from product to product).



How is medicinal cannabis regulated in Australia?

In Australia, the TGA regulates access to medicinal cannabis. States and territories also have their own laws for medicinal cannabis products, which prescribers must follow.¹⁶

Prescribed medicinal cannabis products fall into two main categories – approved and unapproved. Both categories are only available with a prescription.

Approved products are registered on the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG) and assessed by the TGA for quality, safety and effectiveness. Currently, there are only two approved products available in Australia:¹⁶

Product	Description
Nabiximols (brand name Sativex®)	Contains equal parts of THC and CBD. Used to treat muscle stiffness and spasms (spasticity) in people with multiple sclerosis (MS).
Cannabidiol (CBD) (brand name Epidyolex®)	A CBD-only oil preparation. Used with other epilepsy drugs to treat severe and rare forms of epilepsy in children aged 2-25 years. Epidyolex® is on the PBS for patients aged 2 years and older.

Unapproved products are not registered on the ARTG or assessed by the TGA for quality, safety and effectiveness. These products can only be prescribed when other treatments have not worked for a health condition.

Unapproved products are organised into categories based on the proportion of THC to CBD they contain:¹⁷

Product category	CBD content
1: CBD	98%+
2: CBD dominant	60% - 97%
3: Balanced	40% - 59%
4: THC/other cannabinoid dominant	2% - 39%
5: THC/other cannabinoid	Less than 2%

As of 2025, the most commonly accessed medicinal cannabis products were within Category 5 – making up nearly half of all applications to the TGA.⁴

Over 99% of prescribed medicinal cannabis products in Australia are unapproved, and there are currently more than 1,000 different unapproved medicinal cannabis products available.⁴

Advantages of using prescribed medicinal cannabis

Being prescribed a medicinal cannabis product provides many advantages compared to using illicit cannabis for medicinal reasons.

HEALTH PROFESSIONAL OVERSIGHT

Like other medicines, medicinal cannabis is **prescribed** by a qualified health professional.

Seeing your regular health professional means accessing the right care for your condition, including treatment, monitoring, advice, and any additional support you might need.

When discussing medicinal cannabis products, your doctor should consider your:

- **Health condition**
 - the diagnosed condition and what symptoms you're experiencing
 - what other treatments you've tried
 - your treatment preferences and goals
 - if you should be referred to other specialists to help with your condition
 - if there's other approved treatments you should try first.
- **Health history**
 - past medical history, especially any heart, liver, or renal disease
 - mental health history, including history of personal or family mental illness, especially psychosis or schizophrenia
 - other medicines you take, to avoid negative or dangerous interactions.¹²

These considerations will help them determine if medicinal cannabis is an appropriate treatment for your condition.

This oversight also helps to identify and manage any potential risks that may arise from medicinal cannabis use.

Among the 2022-23 CAMS respondents, in comparison to people using illicit cannabis for medicinal reasons, those who used prescribed medicinal cannabis products:

- were more likely to be engaged with health professionals for their condition
- had better awareness of what's in the products they use
- were less likely to use in harmful ways (for example, were vaping or swallowing, rather than smoking)
- reported less severe side effects.⁹

BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF PRODUCT CONTENTS

Unapproved medicinal cannabis products are not routinely assessed by the TGA for quality, safety or effectiveness.¹⁸ But they must meet the **TGA minimum quality standards**.

These quality standard requirements include:

- ensuring products only contain active ingredients from the cannabis plant
- the product must have accurate, clearly labelled information on the type and amount of active cannabinoids in it
- producers should conduct lab testing to identify cannabinoid content and screen for harmful contaminants.¹⁸

Producers of imported unapproved products don't need to prove to the TGA that they're compliant with these standards, only Australian producers do.¹⁹

Compared to illicitly sourced cannabis, people who use prescribed medicinal cannabis have a better idea of what their product contains - and have a reduced risk of potential harms from contaminants or unknown contents sometimes found in illicit cannabis.⁹



LEGAL ACCESS

When you're prescribed medicinal cannabis, you can legally purchase it from a pharmacy, and possess and use it as directed.¹⁶

This means if you switch from using illicit cannabis for medicinal reasons to prescribed medicinal cannabis products, you no longer risk fines or criminal charges for use or possession - as long as you follow prescription laws.

Like any other prescribed medicine, it's illegal to:

- share your prescribed medicinal cannabis with anyone else
- purchase from anywhere other than a pharmacy
- take more medicinal cannabis than you've been prescribed
- take it in a way other than prescribed (for example, smoking it in a joint or bong, rather than using a TGA-approved device).¹⁶

You should store your medicinal cannabis products in the original container. And always have your valid prescription with you if you're carrying medicinal cannabis products.¹⁶

Visit the TGA's **website** for more information on legal requirements including travel restrictions and driving laws.

Barriers to accessing medicinal cannabis

While ease of access to medicinal cannabis has improved in recent years, some barriers remain.

DRIVING

It's illegal to drive if you're impaired by any drug or medication. And certain medicinal cannabis products can impair your ability to drive.¹⁶ It's also illegal in most states and territories to drive if you have any THC in your body, even if you're prescribed medicinal cannabis and aren't impaired.¹⁶

Roadside drug tests are used to detect the presence of THC, which can stay in your body for days after you've taken it.¹²

You can be at risk of fines, loss of licence, and criminal penalties. Each state and territory has different regulations. Be sure to check the laws specific to your state or territory.²⁰

COST

One of the biggest barriers to accessing medicinal cannabis products is the cost.^{16, 21}

While costs seem to have reduced over recent years, there's still no subsidy available for most medicinal cannabis products under the **Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS)**.⁹

And among CAMS 2022-23 respondents, those who used medicinal cannabis clinics (which are often for-profit companies) paid on average 20% more than people using other health services, like their general practitioner.²²

Speak to your prescriber about the cost of products and the different options available. You can also check with your private health insurance provider, to find out if they cover some of the costs of non-PBS medicines.

STIGMA

Although stigma is reducing, medicinal cannabis use is still stigmatised.²²⁻²⁶ This can impact acceptability of, and access to, medicinal cannabis products.²⁴

Stigma may make you feel nervous or hesitant to discuss medicinal cannabis with your regular doctor.^{24, 26}

Stigma can also affect health professionals.

An Australian study of health professionals found some doctors feel uncomfortable seeking advice from their colleagues on best prescribing practices for medicinal cannabis. They may also worry about being judged by other professionals if they do prescribe it.²³

It's important that you feel comfortable and supported when speaking with your usual doctor.

If you don't feel comfortable with your usual doctor, consider finding a regular doctor that you do feel comfortable talking to.²⁶ Learn more at [how to find the right health professional](#).

A non-judgmental doctor can help address your concerns and reduce stigma. Establishing an ongoing, trusted relationship with a regular doctor can also support better decisions and improve your overall health outcomes.²⁷

PRESCRIBER AVAILABILITY

While prescriber availability has increased, the availability of doctors who prescribe medicinal cannabis is still limited and can vary by location.²⁴

Some doctors have reported they're reluctant to consult with patients about medicinal cannabis. There can be many reasons for this, some include:

- They're hesitant to prescribe, as there's limited evidence on how it works for different conditions.
- They feel they don't have enough knowledge, including:
 - uncertainty on how to apply to the TGA for access
 - confusion about the different products and doses available
 - no previous experience or education on how to prescribe it.
- They're concerned about prescribing an unapproved product, including:
 - the potential for legal liability
 - unknown risks for the patient
 - how time-consuming the process is to get approvals.^{23, 24}

If your regular health professional does not feel confident in consulting about medicinal cannabis, ask if they can refer you to a specialist. However, medicinal cannabis should always be a decision that includes your regular doctor, so they remain informed about your treatment.

Finding a health professional that is knowledgeable about both your condition and medicinal cannabis is important. They should provide comprehensive assessment, care and ongoing clinical management.



Considerations when accessing medicinal cannabis

There are considerations when deciding whether medicinal cannabis best meets your treatment needs.

SIDE EFFECTS

When taking medicinal cannabis, you may experience side effects.

In general, less side effects are experienced from CBD than THC.¹³

According to CAMS 2022-23, most people (97%) who use medicinal cannabis report their side effects were mild and tolerable.⁹

Some common side effects from medicinal cannabis (both CBD and THC) include:

- feeling tired
- dizziness (vertigo)
- nausea and vomiting
- fever
- changes in appetite
- memory problems
- eye irritation
- dry mouth
- diarrhoea.¹³

Less commonly, side effects can be serious. THC products, especially high-THC products, are more likely to cause serious side effects. These can include:

- depression
- paranoia
- hallucinations, psychosis
- seizures.¹³

If you're experiencing side effects, speak with your prescriber. They can help by adjusting the formulation or dose.

INTERACTIONS WITH OTHER DRUGS

Like other medicines, medicinal cannabis can react with other prescription and over-the-counter medications, illegal drugs and herbal products.

How medicinal cannabis interacts with other medicines is not well known.

It may interact with drugs used for chemotherapy, pain management, mental

health, and palliative care, as well as other medicines. This can impact the medicine's effectiveness or cause other side effects.¹³ More research is needed to confirm this.

It's important to tell your prescriber about any medicines or supplements you're currently taking, so they can help you reduce the risk of experiencing a drug interaction or other side effects.

TOLERANCE

Tolerance is when you need to take larger amounts of a drug to get the same effects. It develops over time, meaning if you use medication daily, you may find your treatment gradually becomes less effective.

You can develop a tolerance to THC if you take it regularly.²⁸

If you regularly take CBD, you may also develop a tolerance, but more research is needed to confirm this.²⁹

Importantly, if you experience tolerance, speak to your prescriber. They can discuss your options, including adjusting your dose, changing products, or switching to a different medicine.

WITHDRAWAL AND DEPENDENCE

Withdrawal refers to the symptoms that can occur when you're dependent on a drug, or use it regularly over time, and then you stop or reduce your use.³⁰

It's not uncommon to become dependent on prescription drugs, even when you take them as prescribed.

You are not likely to experience withdrawal or dependence from CBD-only products.^{29, 31}

But, THC products, especially high-THC products, have a higher risk for withdrawal and dependence, due to their psychoactive properties.³²

You can reduce the risk of becoming dependent or experiencing withdrawal by taking products containing low or no THC and avoiding shorter-acting methods of use (like vapourising).

CONCERNS AROUND CANNABIS CLINICS

In recent years, there's been an increase in the number of cannabis clinics in Australia. These clinics are often **for-profit** companies that usually only prescribe medicinal cannabis and don't provide other treatments.

Concerns about cannabis clinics have included:

Concern	Reasons for concern	Considerations
Clinic has a narrow focus	- Cannabis clinics often only prescribe medicinal cannabis. They don't prescribe or provide referrals to other treatments which may be more effective – or could help alongside medicinal cannabis. - They usually don't specialise in the condition you're seeking medicinal cannabis for.²²	- Regularly see your GP or specialist, so they can monitor your health condition more broadly. - Inform your GP or specialist if you've been prescribed medicinal cannabis by a cannabis clinic. - If you're unsure about the advice from the clinic, consider seeking a second opinion.
Clinic has a conflict of interest	- Some clinics have 'preferred provider' arrangements with a specific pharmacy or producer: - they may tell you that you can only go to a specific pharmacy or get a specific product – which may be more expensive, less accessible, or not suited to your overall healthcare needs. - If the prescriber is employed by a medicinal cannabis access clinic, they may be expected to prescribe the clinic's preferred product only.	- The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency states: 'you get to choose where to take your prescriptions to get your medicines':³³ - if asked, your prescriber should release your prescription for you to fill at any pharmacy - some pharmacies don't stock medicinal cannabis products, call your pharmacy to check. - Ask your prescriber for a 'generic' prescription, which should allow you to get other substitute brand products from that category.³⁴ - If you already have a valid prescription, platforms like Catalyst or cannareviews may help you compare pharmacy locations and product prices.
Clinic is using unlawful advertising	- It's illegal to advertise prescription medicines to the public. This includes medicinal cannabis.³⁵ Despite this, some medicinal cannabis clinics and companies are still advertising.³⁶ - Ads often use language like 'green medicine' or 'plant medicine' to try and get around the advertising laws.³⁷	- Avoid using cannabis clinics that you have found through advertising. - If you see a cannabis producer or prescriber advertising medicinal cannabis, you can report it to the TGA.



Accessing medicinal cannabis

Talk to your usual GP, nurse practitioner or healthcare specialist about whether medicinal cannabis might be appropriate for treating your health condition.

Cannabis access clinics are an option - but be cautious of the growing concerns highlighted in the table above. And be sure your regular health provider is still involved in your treatment.

If your doctor believes medicinal cannabis treatment is clinically appropriate, they can apply to the TGA online for approval to prescribe you a medicinal cannabis product. Approval usually takes 24-48 hours.³⁸

Once approved, your doctor completes a prescription that can be filled and dispensed at an authorised pharmacy.

You will need to attend regular review appointments with your prescriber to assess effectiveness, any adverse effects, continued need and whether your treatment goals are being met.

If you're unsure or concerned about the quality of care you've received from your prescriber, you have the right to seek a **second opinion**.

For more information about accessing prescribed medical cannabis visit the TGA's **webpage for patients**.

Each state and territory has different laws about accessing prescribed medicinal cannabis. Find out more by visiting your local health department page below:

- **Australian Capital Territory**
- **New South Wales**
- **Northern Territory**
- **Queensland**
- **South Australia**
- **Tasmania**
- **Victoria**
- **Western Australia**.

CLINICAL TRIALS

You may also be able to access medicinal cannabis products through a clinical trial, if your condition is currently being studied and you meet the study inclusion criteria.

Information about current and upcoming clinical trials can be found on the Australian Clinical Trials **webpage**.

Tips on talking to your doctor about medicinal cannabis

PREPARE FOR YOUR APPOINTMENT

- Think about your health condition, symptoms, and how these affect your daily life.
- Be ready to discuss the treatments you've tried, including what has or hasn't worked.
- Write down any questions you may have.
- Seek care from a qualified and independent health professional that you trust, such as your GP or specialist.
- Be sure to have enough time to discuss with your healthcare provider, this may mean you need to book a longer appointment.

ATTENDING YOUR APPOINTMENT

- Be open and honest about your symptoms and medical history.
- Ask questions if anything is unclear — this may include how the product works, how to take it, expected benefits, risks, and alternatives.
- Instead of, or alongside, medicinal cannabis products, your prescriber may recommend alternative treatments, further assessments or referral to a specialist.

AFTER YOUR APPOINTMENT

- Stay in contact with your doctor and attend follow-up appointments to review your treatment.
- Monitor for changes to your condition over time and note anything unexpected.
- If you're prescribed medicinal cannabis, keep track of how it affects you, including any symptom reductions or side effects.

Need more information?

- **TGA's Medicinal Cannabis Hub**
- **TGA's Access to medicinal cannabis products: frequently asked questions (FAQs)**
- **TGA's Information Line (1 800 020 653) or email (medicinal.cannabis@health.gov.au)**
- **Health Direct's Medicinal Cannabis information page**
- **Lambert Initiative for Cannabinoid Therapeutics, University of Sydney**

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