



Medicinal cannabis and persistent pain

- There's a lot of interest in the use of medicinal cannabis for many health conditions
- At the moment there's not enough evidence to support its use to treat persistent pain related to arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- More research is needed

In 2017 the Australian Government granted the first license for an Australian company to grow and harvest medicinal cannabis. The aim was to improve access to legal, domestically produced, high quality cannabis for medicine and research.

Since then, medicinal cannabis prescriptions have taken off, with the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) granting over 25,000 applications from doctors in 2019 to prescribe cannabis, mostly in the form of an oil.

This information sheet will explore the use of medicinal cannabis in Australia – specifically in relation to musculoskeletal conditions and pain.

Is it marijuana or cannabis?

It's both. Marijuana and cannabis are different names for the same plant - marijuana is the commonly used name, cannabis is the scientific name. The term medical marijuana is often used in the media, however medicinal cannabis is generally preferred to draw the distinction between medicinal use of cannabis and the illegal, recreational use of marijuana.

The power of cannabinoids

Cannabinoids are chemicals found in the cannabis plant. They bind onto specific receptors (CB1 and CB2) on the outside of our cells and can affect things such as our appetite, pain-sensation, mood, and memory.

Cannabis has more than 100 cannabinoids; the two major ones are tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD). THC is the cannabinoid linked with the 'high' or 'euphoria' associated with recreational marijuana use.

Cannabinoids also occur naturally in our body (endocannabinoids) and can be created artificially (synthetic cannabinoids).

Cannabinoids are the chemicals that researchers are studying for their potential therapeutic effects.

How is it taken?

Medicinal cannabis, both plant-based and synthetic, can come in a range of forms including tablets, oils and vapours. Smoking isn't an approved preparation as it carries the same health risks as smoking cigarettes.

Is there any evidence for its use?

Evidence for the use of medicinal cannabis to treat pain associated with arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions is slowly emerging, but is still sparse.

Cannabis has been an illegal drug for a long time. This has caused difficulties in conducting high quality studies into its therapeutic effects in people with a variety of health conditions.

So at the moment, we are still accumulating the scientific evidence around beneficial effects, side effects, dosages, and whether THC, CBD or both are best for treating a specific condition. A lot of research is underway and we will know much more soon!

More research is also needed to determine the risks associated with long term use of medicinal cannabis.

In their position statement on medicinal cannabis, the [Australian Rheumatology Association \(ARA\)](#) state "research so far shows that only a small number of people treated with cannabinoids for painful conditions notice a small improvement in pain and sleep, and there is little or no improvement in their ability to participate in daily activities. Many people experience unpleasant side-effects...and there may be other important side-effects in the long term that we do not know about yet...As such the ARA does not recommend the routine use of these products for arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions." [\(1\)](#)



While CBD is generally considered safe and without serious side effects, THC can have significant side effects in vulnerable individuals. We are still accumulating the information around the risks and benefits people may experience with medicinal cannabis products, particularly on a long term basis.

As with any treatment or intervention, you and your doctor will weigh up the risks and benefits for your specific situation.

Side effects

Medicinal cannabis is a medication, and like all medications it can have side effects. They can range from mild to severe, and may include: fatigue, nausea, vomiting, changes in appetite, hallucinations and psychosis.

The extent of side effects can vary with the type of medicinal cannabis product and between people.²

How do I access medicinal cannabis?

If you think medicinal cannabis is something you'd like to try, it's a bit complicated. We aren't at the stage where a doctor can just write a prescription that you can fill at a chemist.

Talk with your doctor to find out whether it's a possible option for you. If you decide to go ahead with medicinal cannabis, your doctor will need to apply for approval to prescribe it to you. Each state or territory has different rules relating to medicinal cannabis and whether it can be prescribed or not.

It's important that you note that medicinal cannabis is not on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), so if you can access it, you'll need to pay all the costs

Caution

Driving with any THC in your blood system is a criminal offence in Australia. You'll need to check the product information for your medicinal cannabis to ensure it doesn't contain THC. Talk with your doctor and/or pharmacist about possible side effects and whether they'll affect your ability to drive.

We also don't have enough information about how medicinal cannabis may interact with other medications or supplements you may be taking. If you experience any unusual symptoms, you need to discuss these with your doctor.

Conclusion

In reality, for most people the use of medicinal cannabis is a long way off. And unlike the way it's often portrayed in the media, it won't be a panacea or magic bullet that will cure all ills.

It will also not work in isolation – you'll still need to do all of the other things you do to manage your condition

and pain, including exercise, managing your weight, mindfulness, managing stress, pacing etc.

The important thing is to be as educated as you can and be open in your discussions with your doctor. And be aware that cannabis for non-medicinal purposes is still illegal in Australia.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Musculoskeletal Australia
www.msk.org.au
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Better Health Channel. Medicinal cannabis. 2019.
<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/medicinal-cannabis>
- Therapeutic Goods Administration. Medicinal cannabis - guidance documents. 2018
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- VicRoads. Medicinal cannabis and driving. 2020.
<https://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/safety-and-road-rules/driver-safety/drugs-and-alcohol/medicinal-cannabis-and-driving>

References

1. Australian Rheumatology Association. On the use of cannabinoids for arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions in adults, 2021.
https://rheumatology.org.au/Portals/2/Documents/Public/Professionals/Position%20Statements/211130_ARA_Cannabanoid%20Position%20Statement.pdf?ver=2021-12-13-161455-620

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