



B.C. Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association

MEMBER UPDATE

ReFresh

April 27, 2022



This week...

Considering Cannabis as Part of a Health Routine

Cannabis became legal for recreational use in October 2018, but did you know that it had been legal for medicinal purposes since 2001?

Research on how Cannabis can be used for prevention and treatment of illnesses and injuries is still in its infancy, but the recent legalization has improved access and provided more opportunities to learn about and develop evidence for the ways in which different parts of the plant can be used for medical purposes.

What is medical cannabis?

The term 'medical cannabis' is used to describe products derived from the cannabis plant and its extracts, which contain a variety of active cannabinoids and terpenes. Patients can

take these products for medical reasons after speaking with their health care practitioner and obtaining authorization.

Cannabis has considerable potential to support health due to its unique ability to connect with our body's endocannabinoid system, a communications system that is made up of natural molecules known as cannabinoids and the pathways where they  interact. This system is found in the brain and body, and it works to regulate a number of internal functions, including mood, memory, sleep, and appetite.

Similar to opioids (such as codeine, morphine, oxycodone), cannabinoids produce their effects by interacting with specific receptors that are located within different parts of the central nervous system. Cannabinoids regulate how cells send, receive, or process messages.

What do cannabinoids do within cannabis?

Cannabis contains more than 61 active chemicals – called cannabinoid compounds – found inside the plant that can be accessed for medical therapy. There are two compounds used for therapeutic purposes:

- **9-Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)** THC produces the psychoactive, euphoric, mind-altering effects we usually associate with cannabis. It also has analgesic (pain-relief), anti-nausea, appetite stimulant, and anti-spastic effects.
- **Cannabidiol (CBD)** CBD *does not cause psychoactive effects*. It has neuro-protective, anti-inflammatory, anti-anxiety, anti-epileptic, and anti-psychotic properties.

Patients taking cannabis for medical reasons generally use cannabinoids to alleviate symptoms while minimizing intoxication. Medical cannabis is authorized and prescribed by a professional (usually a physician) who provides a medical document allowing individuals to obtain their cannabis from one of two sources:

- Access, for medical purposes, from a federally licensed seller, or,
- Those registered with Health Canada to produce their own cannabis for medical purposes or who designate someone to do it for them.

Medical cannabis is cited as a way to treat disease and provide relief for various medical symptoms. Physicians may prescribe cannabis for the following conditions based on current and comprehensive research:

- Nausea and vomiting associated with anti-cancer and anti-HIV chemotherapy

- Loss of appetite and body weight in cancer and HIV patients
- Neuropathic pain and spasticity relief often associated with multiple sclerosis
- Calming seizures, particularly epilepsy in children
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a relief of anxiety, tension, and sleeplessness
- Crohn's and Ulcerative Colitis inflammation
- Chronic pain (mainly neuropathic and end of life)
- Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS)
- Attention Deficit Disorder

There is still more research and testing to be done, including a better understanding of dosage to determine the right balance between THC and CBD depending on the condition and the person. Meanwhile, growing research is indicating there are other areas where cannabis may be beneficial for disease control and health management, including:

- Advanced cancer pain
- Possible treatment for specific cancer
- Headaches (including migraines)
- Anti-inflammatory: aside from Crohn's disease and Colitis, as mentioned above, it is also used for the treatment for arthritis and even the inflammation in the brain associated with brain deterioration such as dementia and Alzheimer's
- Sleep quality in patients being treated primarily for pain, Parkinson's disease, sleep apnoea, and/or anxiety
- Glaucoma

Evidence is also starting to indicate the ability of cannabis to help heal parts of the brain. Therefore, we may see this plant used for possible future treatments for stroke, head injury, and even oxygen deficiency in newborns to protect brain health.

How is it administered?

Cannabis can be smoked, vaporized, taken orally, sublingually, topically, or rectally. It comes in many forms such as:

- Pills
- Liquid (including tinctures)
- Oil
- Powder
- Dried leaves
- Edibles

- Suppositories

How cannabis is consumed impacts how the drug is released in and processed by the body (e.g. smoking provides a more immediate impact, where digesting takes longer to ‘kick in’ and the effects last longer).

As mentioned, medicinal cannabis is regulated, controlled, and prescribed by medical professionals. That said, you may find stores that are licensed to sell cannabis for recreational use will have different types of products that offer different types of properties and benefits with varying percentages of THC and CBD. For example, you may find a topical cream to reduce the inflammation in your arthritic hand. These products are not regulated; however, some folks may find these provide relief, and a knowledgeable salesperson may be able to provide further information.

There are organizations that can support your interest and/or use so you can learn more about how cannabis may benefit you. One that will be familiar is **Shoppers Drug Mart**. They have a medical cannabis program with a specialised nurse practitioner phoneline. The nurse will learn about your health needs, put together a script balancing what THC and/or CBD proportions you need, and have your medication sent directly to your home.

For example, if inflammation of your hip bothers you during the day, the practitioner may prescribe something high in CBD. Or if you are looking for something to help you sleep at night, they may suggest a more equal combination of THC and CBD. For more information check out: cannabis.shoppersdrugmart.ca

Is medical cannabis safe?

With any type of drug – or even supplements – you should ***always speak to a knowledgeable medical professional***. Over time, there is no reason why cannabis will not become a normal component in our health system like many other treatments. However, there will always be situations and individual factors that make cannabis use unsafe.

Further study is needed, but possible side effects of medical cannabis, particularly as it relates to THC, may include:

- Increased heart rate
- Dizziness
- Impaired concentration and memory
- Slower reaction times
- Negative drug-to-drug interactions

- Increased risk of heart attack and stroke
- Increased appetite
- Potential for addiction
- Hallucinations or mental illness
- Withdrawal symptoms

People who would be unsuited for medication with cannabis or pure cannabinoids include:

- **Pregnant women:** If cannabis is smoked during pregnancy or pure cannabinoids are taken by mouth, whether for medical or non-medical reasons, they cross the placenta and can produce harmful effects on the fetus. It is also secreted in breast milk and can cause harm to the newborn.
- **Children and adolescents:** Cannabis can have serious adverse effects on various aspects of mental and emotional development, depending on the child's age at the start, the duration, and intensity of use (George & Vaccarino, 2015). An exception might be made for children with certain forms of severe childhood epilepsy, who fail to respond to conventional anti-seizure drugs, but do respond to CBD.
- **History of dependency:** Those with a history of problematic substance use or a substance use disorder, whether of alcohol, prescription drugs, or illicit drugs.
- **Personal or family history of psychosis:** Those with a personal or family history are at greater risk of developing an acute psychosis through use of cannabis or THC-like cannabinoids.
- Those with **pre-existing disease of the heart and coronary arteries.**

The effects of mixing cannabis with other drugs, including alcohol, prescription medications, and over-the-counter medicines, are often unpredictable. Using alcohol and cannabis at the same time can increase unpleasant effects, including nausea; vomiting; and feelings of panic, anxiety, and paranoia.

Is it for you?

Only you, and your physician or nurse practitioner knows if cannabis is right for you! Some readers may have tried this treatment or are open to it, and some may never consider this

avenue. Any of these thoughts or feelings are ok, and we should maintain respect for all perspectives.

School districts may have varying policies for employees on the use of medical cannabis. Review your policy to see how your district aligns.

Feel free to check out the sources below for more information.

Sources

Alcohol and Drug Foundation | [Cannabinoids](#)

Arthritis Society | [Medical Cannabis](#)

Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse | [Clearing the Smoke on Cannabis](#)

Canadian Pharmacists Association | [Medical Cannabis Q&A](#)

Government of Canada | [Cannabis for medical purposes under the Cannabis Act: information and improvements](#)

Mayo Clinic | [Medical marijuana](#)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Roche' or similar, with a stylized flourish at the end.

If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.

