Medicinal cannabis

Summary

- Medicinal cannabis products are legal, high quality medicines that can be prescribed for people by their doctor.
- Medicinal cannabis can be used to treat the symptoms of certain medical conditions, and the side effects of some treatments.
- Different medicinal cannabis products are available to treat different conditions.
- To access medicinal cannabis, first speak to your doctor.
- Medicinal cannabis products are not subsidised by the Commonwealth Government, so you need to pay for them yourself.
- Cannabis which has not been prescribed by your doctor is an illegal drug.

What is medicinal cannabis?

Medicinal cannabis products are legal, high quality medicines that can be prescribed for people by their doctor. Medicinal cannabis is derived from cannabis plants and can be used to treat the symptoms of certain medical conditions, and the side effects of some treatments.

There are different medicinal cannabis products available to treat different conditions. The active ingredients in medicinal cannabis are called 'cannabinoids'. There are between 80 and 100 cannabinoids in medicinal cannabis, and researchers are still investigating how they all work.

At the moment, most medicinal cannabis products contain the cannabinoids cannabidiol (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).

What medicinal cannabis products are available?

Medicinal cannabis products vary, depending on the symptoms or condition they are designed to treat. The way that you take them can vary too. Your doctor will need to assess your needs, and make a decision about whether there is an appropriate medicinal cannabis product for you.

The majority of products are available through import, but more locally available products are expected to become available as the Australian medicinal cannabis industry becomes more established.

What can medicinal cannabis be used for?

While cannabis, or marijuana, has been around for a long time, there is still not much formal evidence for doctors to rely on if they are thinking about prescribing a medicinal cannabis product to a patient.

There is some evidence that certain medicinal cannabis products may be useful in treating the following conditions:

- **epilepsy**
- **multiple sclerosis**
- symptoms associated with cancer and cancer treatment (such as nausea, pain and loss of appetite)
- **pain**
- symptom relief in palliative care.

The Commonwealth Government has released documents which summarise the evidence so far that medicinal cannabis may be useful in treating some conditions.
A doctor or specialist can apply to the government for approval to prescribe medicinal cannabis for any medical condition. However, the doctor may have to provide evidence that shows that medicinal cannabis may be effective for the particular condition being treated. The Office of Medicinal Cannabis has information and resources to help support medical professionals prescribing medicinal cannabis.

How can I access medicinal cannabis in Victoria?

You can only access legal medicinal cannabis products via your treating doctor or specialist, and only if they believe medicinal cannabis will help treat your condition.

The first step is to discuss medicinal cannabis with your doctor. If they agree medicinal cannabis is appropriate, they need to decide which medicinal cannabis product to prescribe to you, and get any necessary government approvals.

Once your doctor has received the required approvals, they may issue a prescription to you. You may then take this prescription to any pharmacy to have your medicinal cannabis product dispensed (see Figure 1). More information on accessing medicinal cannabis can be found on the Department of Health and Human Services website.

How much does medicinal cannabis cost?

In Australia, most medicines prescribed by your doctor are subsidised by the Commonwealth Government under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). There are currently no medicinal cannabis products subsidised by the PBS. The cost of medicinal cannabis varies depending on the type of product and the dose recommended by your doctor. As these products are not subsidised by the PBS, you must fund the cost yourself.

The Victorian Government has a ‘compassionate access scheme’ that funds medicinal cannabis products for a limited number of children with severe intractable epilepsy. If you are a parent or carer of a child who may be eligible for this scheme, speak to your child’s paediatric neurologist to find out more.

Can I drive while taking medicinal cannabis?

Driving is not advised while taking medicinal cannabis. THC, one of the common active ingredients in medicinal cannabis, causes impairment in drivers. Unlike alcohol, it is not known what dose of THC will cause impairment in most people.

Even if you believe you are not impaired, it is illegal to drive in Victoria with any THC in your system. Consuming alcohol while taking medicinal cannabis also results in more severe impairment, and carries greater penalties for driving offences.

While CBD on its own is not known to cause impairment, it may occur if the CBD interacts with other medications.

Patients using medicinal cannabis products should seek their doctor’s advice before driving or operating machinery.
Can I bring medicinal cannabis to Australia?

If you are travelling to Australia, you are able to carry up to a 3 months’ supply of medicinal cannabis for yourself or a passenger in your care, provided you have the relevant prescription from a medical practitioner. To learn more, please visit the Office of Drug Control.

Where to get help

- Your GP or treating doctor
- Office of Medicinal Cannabis Tel. (03) 9096 7768
- Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme Tel. 1800 020 613

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Department of Health and Human Services

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