

Understanding Medicinal Cannabis for chronic pain:

A guide for veterans

Developed by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, and the International Network on Health, Hepatitis, and Substance Use (INHSU) and Commissioned by the Department of Veterans' Affairs

This guide is for veterans and the families of veterans who are considering or using medicinal cannabis products for chronic pain (pain lasting three months or more) that is not related to cancer. It explains what medicinal cannabis is, what benefits and risks to expect, and how treatment is monitored over time.

How to use this guide

- Read it from start to finish
- Bring it to appointments to support discussions.

This guide explains what to expect if you are prescribed medicinal cannabis products, including the benefits and risks. It helps you prepare for discussions with your doctor, but it does not replace medical advice.

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What are medicinal cannabis products?

Medicinal cannabis products are regulated prescription medicines. They may contain:

- THC (tetrahydrocannabinol)
- CBD (cannabidiol)
- other cannabinoids, depending on the product.

Doctors may consider medicinal cannabis products after other evidence-based drug treatments have been trialled without long-term benefit. Non-drug treatments – including exercise, physiotherapy, and psychological support – are the foundation of chronic pain management and should be continued alongside any medicinal cannabis treatment.

Medicinal cannabis products may help some people, but do not work for everyone. Doctors prescribe cautiously and review regularly to make sure the benefits outweigh the risks.

Limitations of medicinal cannabis products

- Not a cure: Chronic pain often involves complex physical, neurological, and psychological factors. Medicinal cannabis products do not address all of these and cannot cure chronic pain. Success is measured by improvements in quality of life
- Not an early treatment option: Medicinal cannabis is prescribed only after other treatments have not helped enough. This reflects limited evidence of benefit and known risks
- Not suitable for everyone: Medicinal cannabis can make some medical or mental health conditions worse. It can also interact with other medicines, which is why doctors tailor treatments carefully



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How medicinal cannabis products differ from non-prescribed cannabis

Medicinal cannabis products are prescribed and monitored over time. Non-prescribed cannabis varies in strength and effects. Past use may not reflect how you respond to treatment.

Unlike most medicines available in Australia, the majority of medicinal cannabis products have not been formally assessed for safety and effectiveness by the medicines regulator (TGA).

THC and CBD have different effects on the mind

THC is the part of cannabis that causes the "high" and can sometimes trigger anxiety or paranoia. CBD does not cause a high and can help to counteract some of THC's unwanted mental effects.

Doctors prescribe combinations of THC and CBD, and sometimes other cannabinoids.

The exact combination will be based on your specific needs and medical history.

Side effects and risks

Medicinal cannabis products can cause side effects and create risks, which vary from person to person. Most of the side effects and risks are associated with products containing THC. This is why treatment starts slowly and is reviewed regularly.

Common side effects

Some side effects are common, especially early in treatment or when doses increase. These may include:

- drowsiness or fatigue
- dizziness or light-headedness
- slowed thinking or concentration
- anxiety or mood changes
- nausea and vomiting
- balance problems or increased risk of falls.

For many people, mild side effects improve as the body adjusts or after dose changes. For others, side effects continue or outweigh the benefits.

Mental health impacts

Medicinal cannabis products can affect mood, anxiety, and thinking. These effects are most commonly associated with THC-containing products. Some people notice worsening anxiety, low mood, irritability, or changes in perception.

In some cases, medicinal cannabis products can cause psychotic symptoms, where a person loses touch with reality. This may include hearing or seeing things that are not there. These effects are more likely in people with current or past mental health conditions or a family history of these experiences.

Report any new or worsening symptoms, or any concerns about the medication, early so your doctor can adjust or stop treatment as needed.



Seek urgent medical help if you have severe side effects, such as seeing or hearing things that are not there, or severe vomiting.

Cannabis Use Disorder

Some people who use THC-containing medicinal cannabis products develop Cannabis Use Disorder (CUD). This means they have difficulty controlling cannabis use despite it causing problems in their life.

One in four people prescribed medicinal cannabis products may develop Cannabis Use Disorder. Regular reviews help doctors identify any concerns early and adjust treatment if needed.

Long-term side effects

- ongoing problems with memory, thinking, or concentration, especially with THC
- worsening mental health symptoms
- heart-related effects, such as a fast heart rate or palpitations
- falls or injuries due to dizziness or balance
- repeated nausea and vomiting.



If you use medicinal cannabis products, tell at least one friend or family member. Ideally, this is someone you live with. Make sure they understand the risks and possible side effects so they can help you monitor them.

The process

Step 1: Assessment

Medicinal cannabis products can affect both physical and mental health. Assessment helps keep treatment safe.

Your doctor will review:

- how pain affects your daily life
- your mental health history
- your medical conditions
- your current medicines and supplements
- any past or current substance use
- what other drug and non-drug treatments you have tried for your chronic pain, and if they worked.

This helps your doctor decide if treatment is suitable and how closely to monitor it. You will make this decision together and sign a consent form to confirm you understand the risks, side effects, and possible benefits.

Remember, active self-management strategies, including exercise, physiotherapy, and psychological support, form the foundation of long-term pain management.

Mental health considerations

Before and during treatment, your doctor will consider conditions such as:

- anxiety
- depression
- PTSD
- any history of psychotic illness (losing touch with reality, or hearing or seeing things that aren't there).

This is because medicinal cannabis products can affect mood and thinking. In some people, it can worsen or trigger mental health symptoms. Careful assessment helps reduce these risks and supports safe monitoring.

Substance use considerations

Your doctor will also ask about your past and current use of cannabis, alcohol and other substances. This is because these substances can affect:

- safety
- dosing decisions
- monitoring.



Remember: Your doctor is there to help treat your pain and keep you safe, not to judge. Be open about your substance use and mental health so they can prescribe safely.

The process

Step 2: Starting treatment

Start low, go slow

Your doctor will choose a medicinal cannabis product based on your specific pain, health, and risk factors.

Most people start on an oral product (e.g., oil, capsule) that contains CBD and low-dose THC.

You will start on a low dose. Your doctor will increase the dose slowly if needed.



Start at a low dose



Increase slowly over time



Increase only if benefits outweigh side effects



This is because:

- everyone responds differently
- higher doses are not always better
- the aim is for the lowest dose that improves function.



This approach reduces side effects and helps your doctor assess if the treatment is working.

How to use medicinal cannabis products

The safest and most reliable way to take medicinal cannabis products is by mouth, such as oils or capsules. These products provide a more consistent effect and make dosing easier to manage.

Smoking medicinal cannabis products is not recommended as it can harm your lungs and make it harder to control how much you take.

In some cases, your doctor may recommend an inhaled product, such as a vaporiser, if it is the best option for your situation. Because inhaling carries risks, particularly for lung health, this would only happen under specific guidance and careful monitoring.

Step 3: Monitoring and review

Regular reviews help your doctor see whether treatment is improving your day-to-day life and wellbeing, or causing harm. At each visit, your doctor will check:

- daily function
- sleep and wellbeing
- mental health
- side effects
- signs of Cannabis Use Disorder (CUD).

Your doctor will review your progress regularly to track changes over time. Reviews are more frequent at the start, and less often once treatment is stable. These reviews help decide whether to continue, adjust, or stop treatment.

The process

Step 4: Continuing or stopping treatment

How well medicinal cannabis products work can change over time. Regular reviews help your doctor in determining whether treatment is still helping, needs adjusting, or should stop.

If you continue treatment

Your doctor will regularly check that the treatment is helping more than it is causing side effects or other problems. This is an ongoing process, not a one-off decision.

How well treatment works can change over time. These check-ins help make sure it continues to benefit you.

Treatment is likely to continue if:

- your pain interferes less with daily life
- your sleep or function improves
- side effects remain manageable
- there are no new safety concerns.

If you keep taking the medicine:

- your dose may stay the same or change gradually in small amounts
- the goal is the lowest dose that still works well for you
- your doctor will keep an eye on things over time to make sure the medicine continues to help you
- continue with other non-drug treatments (e.g., exercise, physiotherapy) as the foundation of your pain management.

If your dose increases, your doctor will check that it is making a meaningful difference.

If you stop treatment

It is important to know that most people who try medicinal cannabis products do not achieve meaningful long-term benefit. Stopping treatment is a normal and expected outcome, not a failure. It means the benefits no longer outweigh the risks for you.

Your doctor may reduce or stop treatment if:

- it is no longer helping your pain, sleep, or daily life
- side effects become difficult to manage
- your mental health changes
- it becomes hard to control how much you use, or there are signs of dependence
- new safety concerns arise.

These decisions are based on how things change over time, not one appointment or one bad day.

If you and your doctor decide to stop treatment, this will usually happen gradually rather than all at once. Your doctor will lower your dose over time to help your body adjust and reduce uncomfortable symptoms.

Your doctor may:

- lower your dose slowly
- pause or slow changes if you are finding them difficult
- switch you to a product with less THC.

As your body adjusts, you may notice short-term changes such as irritability, trouble sleeping, anxiety, or increased pain. Your doctor can help you manage these symptoms.

Your role in care

Medicinal cannabis products work best when you and your doctor communicate openly.

Always:

- share your medical and mental health history openly
- discuss past and current substance use honestly, including cannabis and alcohol
- track changes in pain, sleep, mood, daily activities, and side effects
- report new or worsening symptoms early rather than waiting for your next review
- bring an up-to-date list of medicines and supplements to appointments
- before any medical procedures, tell your healthcare team — including doctors, specialists, pharmacists, and anaesthetists — that you are using medicinal cannabis products so they can check for interactions with your other medicines.

Small changes over time matter. Sharing them early helps your doctor decide whether treatment should continue, change, or stop.

It's also important to:

- seek urgent medical care if you experience severe side effects, such as severe vomiting, or psychotic symptoms (losing touch with reality, or hearing or seeing things that aren't there)
- tell at least one trusted person, ideally someone you live with, that you are starting treatment
- store your medicine securely, keeping it out of reach of children and pets.

Questions to ask your doctor

- what are we hoping this treatment will help with?
- how will we know if it is working?
- what side effects should I report straight away?
- how could this affect my mental health, sleep, driving, or work?
- how often will I need reviews?
- how might this interact with my other medicines or alcohol?
- what signs might mean treatment should change or stop?
- what other pain management approaches should I continue?

How carers and families of veterans can help

Carers may notice changes earlier or differently than you. They can help by:

- noticing changes in mood, memory, balance, alertness, or sleep
- tracking side effects
- supporting attendance at appointments
- encouraging early discussion of concerns.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are medicinal cannabis products meant to do?

Medicinal cannabis products may help reduce how much pain interferes with your daily life, sleep, or function. They are not a first-line treatment, not a cure, and do not work for everyone.

Will I need to take them long-term?

Not always. Some people continue at a stable dose. Others reduce or stop if benefits are limited or risks increase. Stopping a medicine that is not working is a normal part of care.

Where does this fit with my other treatments?

Medicinal cannabis products are only one part of a broader pain management plan, not a replacement for other treatments. Continue with other non-drug treatments (e.g., exercise, physiotherapy) as the foundation of your pain management.

Can I drive while using medicinal cannabis products?

It is illegal to drive while impaired, even if the medicine is prescribed.

Check your state or territory driving guidance for more information.

Will this show up on a drug test?

Products that contain THC may result in a positive drug test.

Can I drink alcohol while taking medicinal cannabis products?

Alcohol can increase side effects such as drowsiness and impaired thinking. Using alcohol with medicinal cannabis products increases this risk.

How long until I know if it is working?

Many people do not experience meaningful improvement. If you are not noticing functional benefit after an adequate trial, your doctor will discuss whether to continue, adjust, or stop treatment.

What does “working” mean?

Your pain may interfere less with your life. You may sleep better or do more during the day. Pain is unlikely to go away completely.

What side effects should I watch for?

- drowsiness
- dizziness
- slowed thinking
- anxiety
- mood changes
- nausea
- balance problems.

What if I do not like how it makes me feel?

Tell your doctor. Your treatment can be adjusted or gradually stopped at any time.

FAQs continued

What if something doesn't feel right?

If something feels unclear or unsafe, ask early. Medicinal cannabis products work best when there is open communication between you and your doctor.

Do I have to keep taking it once I start?

No. You will only continue treatment if it provides ongoing benefit and the benefits outweigh the risks and side effects.

What happens if it stops helping?

Your doctor may adjust or stop treatment. This is usually done gradually to reduce withdrawal symptoms.

Can I stop suddenly?

If the medicine makes you feel very unwell, for example, vomiting or seeing or hearing things that aren't there, stop taking it and contact your doctor.

Otherwise, stopping suddenly is not recommended. Your doctor will usually reduce your dose gradually to minimise withdrawal symptoms and help your body adjust.

Can I travel with my medication?

Rules vary depending on where you are travelling. Check current local government guidance before you travel.

FAQs for carers and families of veterans

Can I talk to the doctor if I am worried?

Yes. With the veteran's consent, carers can share observations and concerns. This is an important part of safe monitoring.

Does raising concerns mean treatment will stop?

No. Raising concerns allows the care team to adjust treatment early and reduce the risk of harm. Treatment may be stopped if the risks and side effects begin to outweigh the benefits.

Should I be concerned about falls or accidents?

Possibly. Drowsiness and balance problems can increase the risk of falls or accidents.

What changes should I watch for?

Carers often notice:

- ◆ increased drowsiness or fatigue
- ◆ changes in mood or anxiety
- ◆ confusion or slowed thinking
- ◆ balance problems or falls.

These changes should be raised early with the treating team.

Words to know

You may hear the following words if you are prescribed medicinal cannabis products.

THC (tetrahydrocannabinol)	THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) is the component of medicinal cannabinoids that can cause a “high”. It is most linked to both pain-relieving effects and side effects.
CBD (cannabidiol)	CBD (cannabidiol) does not cause a high and has limited benefit for chronic pain on its own.
Cannabis Use Disorder (CUD)	CUD is a diagnostic term that most people understand as ‘addiction’. This includes symptoms like difficulty controlling cannabis use despite experiencing negative impacts of cannabis use on your life. Research suggests this may affect around 1 in 4 people prescribed medicinal cannabis products.
TGA	Therapeutic Goods Administration.
Clinical benefit	A meaningful improvement in outcomes such as the level of pain you experience, how that pain affects your life including your sleep, or quality of life.
Minimum effective dose	The lowest dose that provides adequate therapeutic effect with the fewest side effects.
Long term harms	Health risks that may develop or worsen over months or years of ongoing use.
Adverse effects	Unwanted or harmful physical or mental effects caused by a medication.
Route of administration	The way a medication is taken into the body, such as by mouth, under the tongue, or applied to the skin.