



AUSTRALIAN CANNABIS NURSES ASSOCIATION PATIENT INFORMATION | MEDICAL CANNABIS IN AUSTRALIA

Medicinal cannabis is a growing field of healthcare in Australia. If you are new to medicinal cannabis and considering this as a treatment option for you, here are some important points to understand.

1. MEDICINAL CANNABIS COMES IN MANY FORMS AND STRENGTHS.

Medicinal cannabis products vary in many ways including:

- Base cultivar or 'strain' of the plant that is in the product you are prescribed
- Cannabinoid content (such as THC, CBD, CBN and CBG)
- Isolates or full spectrum products
- Ratio/dose of cannabinoids (CBD, CBN, THC etc) and multiple various strengths of each of the cannabinoids, sometimes within the one product
- Formulation (e.g. oils, capsules, flower, pastille)
- Route of use (inhale, chew, topical, sublingual)

Because everyone's endocannabinoid system is unique, different strengths, combinations and doses are needed for different people, even with the same problem. Our receptor systems are unique to all of us.

Because this area of medicine is still emerging in Australia, not all doctors or nurse practitioners feel confident prescribing it. Specialist knowledge about prescribing medical cannabis is often needed to choose the right product, dosage, and administration method for each patient.

2. NOT EVERY PATIENT IS SUITABLE FOR CANNABIS-BASED TREATMENTS.

Whether medicinal cannabis is appropriate for you depends on a few things including:

- your medical history (including mental health history)
- presenting problem and current symptoms
- an evaluation of what you have tried in the past and how effective (or not) it was
- medications you are taking and allergies
- current and previous experience with cannabis (illicit or prescribed)
- substance use history
- any previous psychosis (induced or otherwise)

A qualified, well informed prescriber should assess your situation and determine if medicinal cannabis is a suitable option.

Treatment should begin slowly and if you have not used cannabis before, with the lowest dose possible. If you experience any side effects or anything that you don't like, the medication can be stopped suddenly without any harm. Always follow up and communicate openly with your prescriber about any issues.

3. SOME CANNABIS MEDICINES CAN CARRY RISKS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH HIGH THC.

Cannabinoids cross the blood brain barrier and some can have a mind-altering effect, especially in naïve populations that have never used cannabis before. For example:

- Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the cannabinoid that at high dose can have mind altering effects.
- Cannabinol (CBN) is a minor cannabinoid that is known to cause sleepiness for some people.

Products high in THC in any shape or form, are not suitable for beginner patients. THC can have different effects on people and can cause side effects such as drowsiness, dizziness, heart palpitations and anxiety. Safe prescribing follows the principle of "start low and go slow", meaning patients begin at a very low dose and increase gradually under a plan or supervision from their prescriber.

4. THC CAN AFFECT YOUR ABILITY TO DRIVE AND MAY LEAD TO LEGAL CONSEQUENCES, DEPENDING ON WHERE YOU LIVE.

Many medicinal cannabis products contain THC, which can impair reaction time and coordination. In most Australian states, any detectable amount of THC in your system while driving is considered a criminal offence, even if the product is legally prescribed. This can result in charges, fines, and licence suspension.

Discuss your treatment and driving needs with your prescriber, and ensure you're up to date with the laws in your state or territory. It is noted that there is current research into cannabis and impairment happening in Victoria, and that some states have indicated that they are open to or in the process of reviewing these laws.



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5. MOST CANNABIS MEDICINES ARE CONSIDERED “UNAPPROVED MEDICINES” IN AUSTRALIA.

There is a TGA process around prescribing medical cannabis that your health practitioner will follow. Medical Cannabis is not subsidised or funded by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), the patient must pay full cost for their medicine.

Nabiximols (for multiple sclerosis) and Epidyolex (for paediatric epilepsy) are the only two “approved” cannabis medicines in Australia.

6. BE CAUTIOUS WHEN ACCESSING MEDICAL CANNABIS VIA ONLINE TELEHEALTH CLINICS.

Some telehealth clinics are run by companies that both prescribe and sell cannabis products. This model known as vertical integration can create a conflict of interest. Patients have reported:

- Being prescribed products with unnecessarily high THC levels and experiencing adverse effects
- Receiving limited consultation time or poor/difficult to access clinical follow-up
- Being placed on auto-renewing subscription models for repeat scripts they may not need
- Being forced to use specific pharmacies
- Being charged automatically without clear consent
- Having medicinal cannabis products arrive in the mail without ordering, via a subscription model

These behaviours may breach consumer and healthcare regulations. Patients are encouraged to:

- Choose prescribers and pharmacies independently where possible
- Ask for transparent consultation notes
- Avoid providing automatic credit card authorisation
- Report unethical conduct to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) or your state’s Health Complaints Commissioner

7. SUBSTITUTIONS AT THE PHARMACY CAN HAPPEN, BE INFORMED.

From time to time, your prescribed product might be unavailable. If this happens, Pharmacists may offer a substitute. While this is permitted, not all cannabis products are the same, and a change in product may lead to differences in how the medicine works for you.

It’s important your prescriber is notified of any substitution so they can monitor your response and adjust your care plan if needed.

8. INFORMED CONSENT & SHARED DECISION-MAKING.

Patients must be given clear, comprehensive information about medicinal cannabis including risks, benefits, costs, and alternatives before commencing treatment. Clinicians should facilitate shared decision-making and support patients in asking questions, seeking second opinions, or declining treatment without pressure.

9. PAEDIATRIC USE, PREGNANCY & BREASTFEEDING.

Medicinal cannabis is not generally recommended during pregnancy, breastfeeding, or in paediatric care unless under the care of a specialist who is also aware that you are prescribed and accessing cannabis.

Patients should always disclose if they are pregnant, breastfeeding, or considering pregnancy to ensure safe prescribing practices.

10. STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION IN HEALTHCARE SETTINGS.

Patients using cannabis medicines often report feeling stigmatised, dismissed, or treated unfairly. Resources are available and they should reassure patients that they are entitled to respectful, trauma-informed care and that discrimination can be formally addressed if it occurs.

11. MEDICINAL CANNABIS IN HOSPITALS AND CONTINUITY OF CARE WITH YOUR MEDICINES.

Many public hospitals lack clear protocols for continuing patient-prescribed cannabis treatment during admission. If needing to maintain cannabis dosing while in hospital, patients should be encouraged to bring their medication in original packaging with a copy of their



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prescription (where possible). Patients should be able to access a letter or contact their prescriber, if needed by the treating health professionals.

Note: there are some types of treatments where it is beneficial to withhold your medical cannabis whilst you are in hospital. It is also appropriate to use hospitalisation (planned or unplanned) as a tolerance break. Your prescriber can guide you here.

12. HOW TO REPORT CONCERNS OR UNSAFE PRACTICES

Consider reporting any medical cannabis clinics with practices that include:

- Overprescribing of products
- Short and/or rushed consultations
- Forced or unaware of subscription payments
- Restriction with choice of pharmacy
- Misuses credit card or personal details

The pathways for reporting are:

- Clinician misconduct – AHPRA (www.ahpra.gov.au)
- Product safety concerns – TGA (www.tga.gov.au)
- Unethical clinical practices – State/Territory Health Complaints Commissioners
- Commercial exploitation or misleading conduct – ACCC (www.accc.gov.au)

Medicinal cannabis may provide relief for certain conditions, but it is not a cure-all. Make sure you work closely with a knowledgeable prescriber, monitor your response carefully, and stay informed about your legal responsibilities, especially when it comes to driving and medication safety.

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