



Cannabis

and cancer



Key points to remember:

- Cannabis is not usually recommended for treating health problems. Cannabis does not treat cancer or lower the risk of getting cancer.
- There are two prescription drugs in Canada that are made up of chemicals found in cannabis called cannabinoids. In some cases, they may help with certain cancer symptoms or cancer treatment side effects when other recommended treatment options do not help.
- When smoked or vaped, cannabis may cause problems with your breathing and lungs. Cannabis can also cause heart and mental health problems.
- More research is needed to find out whether cannabis or cannabis smoke can cause cancer.
- The best way to protect your health from the harms of cannabis is not to use cannabis.

What is cannabis?

- Cannabis (sometimes called marijuana, pot or weed) is a type of plant.
- Cannabis can be found in many forms and is used in different ways including:
 - smoking its dried flowers, leaves, stems or seeds.
 - breathing it in from a vaporizer or a vaping device, like an e-cigarette.
 - eating or drinking it in foods or teas.
 - putting cannabis oils and capsules under the tongue or swallowing them.



What are cannabinoids?

- Cannabinoids are the chemicals in cannabis that affect your brain and body.
- Two well-known cannabinoids are:
 - **THC** (tetrahydrocannabinol), is a drug that changes mood and the way the brain works). THC can give you a “high” feeling that can include feeling happy for a short time. THC can cause many other feelings you may not expect or want to feel.
 - **CBD** (cannabidiol), is a drug that does not give you a “high” feeling.
- Medical cannabinoids are prescription drugs that are made from some of the chemicals found in cannabis.

Talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner about the harms and potential benefits of using cannabis for medical reasons.

Can cannabis help cancer symptoms and cancer treatment side effects?

- Cannabis and cannabinoids are not recommended as the first option for treating most health problems, including cancer symptoms or cancer treatment side effects.
- If other recommended options do not work, some medical cannabinoids may help with the following cancer treatment side effects:
 - pain in people who are getting palliative care (a type of care to help someone who is sick feel more comfortable).
 - pain caused by nerve damage or other problems with the nervous system.
 - nausea (feeling like you might throw up) and throwing up caused by chemotherapy.
- There is not enough research to show whether cannabis and medical cannabinoids may help other cancer symptoms and cancer treatment side effects, like loss of appetite.



Harms of using cannabis

The best way to protect your health from the harms of cannabis is not to use cannabis. Using cannabis can increase your risk of the following short-term and long-term harms.

Short-term harms:

- Mental health problems, like feeling anxious or paranoid (for example, thinking that people are trying to hurt you, even though they are not).
- Higher heart rate (heart beating faster) than normal.
- Slower thoughts (trouble concentrating), body movement, and reactions to things happening to you and around you, which means you may not be able to drive and use other machines safely.

Long-term harms (harms that develop over time with regular use over weeks, months or years):

- Trouble breathing normally and a cough that lasts a long time or does not go away (if cannabis is smoked or vaped).
- Mental health problems, like schizophrenia and psychoses, which are mental illnesses that cause someone to lose touch with reality. You may be more likely to get these mental illnesses if you start to use cannabis before age 25.
- Addiction to using cannabis (feeling like you cannot stop using cannabis).
- Throwing up regularly.

To learn more about the harms of using cannabis, go to the Government of Ontario's web page, "[Health effects of cannabis.](#)"



The laws and cannabis

- It is legal (allowed by law) in Ontario for people age 19 and older to buy and use cannabis from a licensed provider.
- It is not legal to drive under the influence of cannabis.
- It is not legal to take cannabis across the Canadian border.

Medical cannabis:

- The Government of Canada has a system for people who use cannabis for treating certain health problems. To learn more, go to the Government of Canada's web page, "[Accessing cannabis for medical purposes.](#)"
- You will need a medical document, like a prescription, from your doctor or nurse practitioner to get medical cannabis.

For more information about cannabis and cancer

- Government of Ontario website: ontario.ca/page/cannabis
- Government of Canada website: canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis.html
- Canadian Cancer Society website: cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/diagnosis-and-treatment/complementary-therapies/medical-cannabis-and-cannabinoids
- Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines: camh.ca/-/media/files/lrcug_professional-pdf

This fact sheet was created in March 2020. Please contact the Population Health and Prevention unit, Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) at cancerprevention@ontariohealth.ca if you have any feedback.

Acknowledgements:

Special thanks to the Patient and Family Advisors and all our expert reviewers who worked on this resource.

Disclaimer:

The information provided herein is intended for informational purposes only and is not intended to constitute or be a substitute for medical advice. This guide does not include all information about cannabis and cancer. Do not act or rely upon this information without seeking the advice of a qualified physician or other healthcare provider. Always ask your healthcare team if you have questions or concerns.

Need this information in an accessible format?

1-855-460-2647, TTY 416-217-1815, publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca PCC4159



Ontario Health
Cancer Care Ontario