

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) provides advice to Albertans to support improved patient care and safety. This advice does not define a standard of practice, nor should it be interpreted as legal advice.

Patient FAQs are dynamic and may be edited or updated for clarity at any time. Please refer back to these articles regularly to ensure you are aware of the most recent advice.

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Note: This document is meant to answer general questions. Please see your family doctor if you have questions regarding your own care.

Cannabis for Medical Purposes

How is cannabis for medical purposes (CMP) different from recreational cannabis?

CMP is authorized by a healthcare provider who provides their patient with a document allowing them to obtain cannabis for medical purposes from a licensed producer or apply to Health Canada to grow their own. The medical/authorization document allows you access to CMP for treatment of a specific condition or set of conditions and specifies the dosage you should use. Patients typically use cannabinoidsⁱ to alleviate health symptoms, whereas recreational users may be taking cannabis for the effects of euphoria it can cause.ⁱⁱ

What is CMP used for?

CMP is typically authorized for patients with certain medical conditions that have failed to respond to standard treatments. These conditions include chronic neuropathic pain, palliative cancer pain, spasticity (e.g., due to multiple sclerosis or spinal cord injury) or nausea/vomiting due to chemotherapy. Currently, there is little medical evidence to support CMP as a treatment for other pain conditions (e.g., fibromyalgia, low back pain, among others), or for any psychiatric or addictive disorder treatment.ⁱⁱⁱ Evidence will continue to evolve as more research is done.

What is the difference between THC and CBD?

The cannabis plant contains more than 120 compounds known as phytocannabinoids. The most abundant phytocannabinoids in the plant include cannabidiol (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). THC is the main psychoactive compound in cannabis that produces feelings of euphoria or the *high* sensation. CBD doesn't usually produce the high associated with THC; there is some evidence to suggest a potential benefit for conditions like anxiety, depression, and seizures, but further research is needed. Both CBD and THC may be authorized for CMP, but the CBD content of a cannabis product is typically more relevant for its use in medical conditions.

Is CMP safe? What are the risks?

Your doctor should only authorize CMP if they believe it will help your health symptom(s); however, there are some risks to consider:

- The use of CMP has been linked to an increased risk of motor vehicle accidents, which includes risk in safety-sensitive workplaces.
- Smoking CMP during pregnancy has been linked to lower birth weight.
- Some people who use CMP develop cannabis use disorder, which has symptoms such as cravings, withdrawal, lack of control, and negative effects on personal and professional responsibilities.
- Adolescents using CMP are four to seven times more likely than adult users to develop cannabis use disorder.
- CMP use is associated with an increased risk of injury (e.g., broken hip due to a fall) among older adults.
- The use of CMP, especially frequent use, has been linked to a higher risk of developing schizophrenia or other psychoses (severe mental illnesses) in people who are predisposed to these illnesses.
- CMP may cause orthostatic hypotension (a drop in blood pressure that can happen when suddenly standing up, which could lead to weakness, unconsciousness, or falls), possibly raising danger from fainting and falls.
- [Health Canada has warned](#) the public not to use vaping products containing THC. Products of this type have been implicated in many of the reported cases of serious lung injuries linked to vaping.
- Some long-term users of high doses of CMP have developed a condition involving recurrent episodes of severe nausea and vomiting called cannabinoid hyperemesis syndrome.
- There have been reports of contamination of CMP/cannabinoid products with microorganisms, pesticides, or other substances.

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- There have been many reports of unintentional exposure and consumption of CMP or its products by children, leading to illnesses severe enough to require emergency room treatment or admission to a hospital. Among a group of people who became ill after accidental exposure to products containing THC, children generally had more severe symptoms than the adults and needed to stay in the hospital longer.
- Some CMP/cannabinoid products contain amounts of cannabinoids that differ substantially from what's stated on their labels.^{iv} CBD-only products can be contaminated with THC, which may result in positive workplace drug tests.

RISKS OF FREQUENT USE

Using CMP frequently (daily or almost daily) and over a long time (several months or years) can

- Damage your lungs and make it harder to breathe, if smoked:
 - Cannabis smoke contains many of the same harmful chemicals found in tobacco smoke.
- Affect your mental health:
 - Frequent use of THC over a long time increases the risk of [cannabis dependence](#), also called:
 - addiction
 - cannabis use disorder
 - problematic cannabis use
 - It is also associated with an increased risk of developing or worsening disorders related to anxiety and depression. Using products with higher levels of THC (20% THC [200 mg/g] or more) such as resin, hash oil, wax and distillates further increases the risk of mental health problems over time.

Stopping or reducing your CMP use can improve your mental health.^v

How can I get CMP?

The first step is to have a discussion with your family doctor. Your doctor is responsible for providing care in your best interest, which includes determining if CMP is an appropriate treatment for your medical concern(s).

You will need to see your doctor in person for a medical exam. During the appointment, your doctor should ask questions to help determine if CMP is right for you, including questions about your past history and the reasons you're asking for CMP.

There are three ways to get CMP once you have your authorization:

1. Register with a licensed producer (see [Health Canada's website](#)) who can provide you with a number of CMP products;
2. Register with Health Canada to grow your own CMP (see [Health Canada's website](#)); or
3. Designate someone else to grow it for you (see [Health Canada's website](#)).

Why won't my doctor authorize CMP for me?

There are a number of reasons your doctor may not agree to authorize CMP for you. CMP may not be suitable for all patients or all medical conditions (please refer to the [Is CMP Safe? What are the risks?](#) section for more information).

Doctors are not obligated to authorize CMP if they believe it might harm you. If your doctor does not have the knowledge or experience to authorize CMP for you, they should consider referring you to a responsible healthcare provider who may be able to help.

WHO IS A RESPONSIBLE HEALTHCARE PROVIDER?

A healthcare provider who would be considered responsible in authorizing CMP should:

- have expertise in your medical condition;
- give you a careful examination before making any recommendations; and
- let you know what their policies are for authorizing CMP.

A responsible healthcare provider should **not** have any conflicts of interest (e.g., has financial interests in the CMP clinic where authorization happens).

Why do I have to see my doctor in person?

It is important to have an in-person visit with your doctor so they can establish a physician/patient relationship with you. Your doctor will want to give you a thorough examination to ensure your medical condition is stable and will benefit from the use of CMP. They will also want to discuss any risks to using CMP with you.

Why do I have to follow up with my doctor every six months?

Your doctor will want to make sure you are benefitting from the use of CMP and discuss any concerns or questions you may have. It is extremely important to let your doctor know about any changes to your medical condition or your overall health (e.g., you start taking a new vitamin or supplement). This helps your doctor manage your care appropriately.

Do I have to pay for my CMP authorization form?

You should not be charged (i.e., no out of pocket cost) for the authorization form, as the completion of the form is an insured service under the Alberta Health Care Insurance Plan. Any other fees should be discussed with you in advance, and you should have the opportunity to decline additional services if you don't want them (e.g., cannabis education).

Resources

RELATED STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

- [*Cannabis for Medical Purposes*](#)
- [*Advertising*](#)
- [*Code of Ethics & Professionalism*](#)
- [*Conflict of Interest*](#)
- [*Continuity of Care*](#)
- [*Establishing the Physician-Patient Relationship*](#)
- [*Informed Consent*](#)
- [*Patient Record Content*](#)

- [Responsibility for a Medical Practice](#)

COMPANION RESOURCES

- Advice to the Profession documents:
 - [Cannabis for Medical Purposes](#)
 - [Advertising](#)
 - [Conflict of Interest](#)
 - [Continuity of Care](#)
 - [Informed Consent for Adults](#)
 - [Legislated Reporting & Release of Medical Information](#)
 - [Responsibility for a Medical Practice](#)
- [Cannabis – Services and Information](#) (Health Canada)
- [Information for Health Care Practitioners – Medical Use of Cannabis](#) (Health Canada)
- [Guidance in Authorizing Cannabis Products within Primary Care](#) (The College of Family Physicians)
- [The Use of Medical Cannabis with Other Medications: A Review of Safety and Guidelines](#) (Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health)
- [Medical Cannabis Evidence Bundle](#) (Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health)
- [Implications of Cannabis Legalization on Youth and Young Adults](#) (Canadian Psychiatric Association)
- [The Health Effects of Cannabis and Cannabinoids: The Current state of Evidence and Recommendations for Research](#) (National Academies report summary: free PDF download available with account creation/login)
- The Occupational and Environmental Medical Association of Canada’s [Position Statement on the Implications of Cannabis Use for Safety-Sensitive Work](#)

ⁱ Cannabinoids are naturally occurring compounds found in the *Cannabis sativa* plant. Cannabinoids exert their effects by interacting with specific cannabinoid receptors present on the surface of cells. From News Medical Life Sciences’ “[What are cannabinoids?](#)”

ⁱⁱ From the Canadian Pharmacists Association’s “[Medical Cannabis Q & A](#)”

ADVICE TO ALBERTANS

Cannabis for Medical Purposes

^{iv} From the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health's "[Cannabis \(Marijuana\) and Cannabinoids: What You Need to Know](#)"

^v From the Government of Canada's "[Cannabis in Canada: Get the Facts](#)"