



Medicinal cannabis and persistent pain

- There's growing interest in the use of medicinal cannabis for many health conditions
- At the moment there's not enough evidence to support its use to treat persistent pain related to arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- More research is needed

In 2017 the Australian Government granted the first license for an Australian company to grow and harvest medicinal cannabis. The aim is to improve access to legal, domestically produced, high quality cannabis for medicine and research.

This information sheet will look briefly at medicinal cannabis in Australia.

Is it marijuana or cannabis?

It's both. Marijuana and cannabis are different names for the same plant - marijuana is the commonly used name, cannabis is the scientific name. The term medical marijuana is often used in the media, however medicinal cannabis is generally preferred to draw the distinction between medicinal use of cannabis and the illegal, recreational use of marijuana.

The power of cannabinoids

Cannabinoids are chemicals found in the cannabis plant. They bind onto specific receptors (CB1 and CB2) on the outside of our cells and can affect things such as our appetite, pain-sensation, mood, and memory.

Cannabis has more than 100 cannabinoids; the two major ones are tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD). THC is the cannabinoid linked with the 'high' or 'euphoria' associated with recreational marijuana use.

Cannabinoids also occur naturally in our body (endocannabinoids) and can also be created artificially (synthetic cannabinoids).

Cannabinoids are the chemicals that researchers are studying for their potential therapeutic effects.

How is it taken?

Medicinal cannabis, both plant-based and synthetic, can come in a range of forms including tablets, oils, vapours and tinctures. Smoking isn't an approved preparation as it carries the same health risks as smoking cigarettes.

Is there any evidence for its use?

Evidence for the use of medicinal cannabis to treat pain associated with arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions is currently lacking. Cannabis has been illegal for so long that we just don't have the thorough, scientific evidence we need about side effects or dosages, or the health conditions or symptoms it may be beneficial for. Some research is emerging, but much more is needed.

For this reason, the Australian Rheumatology Association in their Position Statement on the use of medicinal cannabis stated:

'there should be evidence of efficacy and safety from high-quality randomised controlled trials (RCTs) before any potential intervention for chronic musculoskeletal pain (or other musculoskeletal diseases or symptoms) is adopted into clinical practice. Furthermore, the role of any intervention should weigh RCT evidence for efficacy against potential harms detected in RCTs and longer-term observational data. There is currently not enough supportive evidence to recommend medical cannabis as a clinical intervention for chronic musculoskeletal pain outside of a clinical trial setting'.¹



There is some evidence that suggests medicinal cannabis may be helpful in treating nausea and vomiting in people undergoing chemotherapy and stimulating appetite in people with AIDS.

More research is needed to determine the risks associated with long term use of medicinal cannabis.

As with any treatment or intervention, you and your doctor will weigh up the risks and benefits for your specific situation.

How do I access medicinal cannabis?

If you think medicinal cannabis is something you'd like to try, it's a bit complicated. We aren't at the stage where a doctor can just write a prescription that you can fill at a chemist.

Each state or territory has different laws – from whether it's available, to who can access it. Talk with your doctor to find out whether it's available and a possible option for you. It's important that you note that medicinal cannabis is not on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), so if you can access it, you'll need to pay all the costs.

In reality, for most people the use of medicinal cannabis is a long way off. And unlike the way it's often portrayed in the media, it won't be a panacea or magic bullet that will cure all ills.

The important thing is to be as educated as you can and be open in your discussions with your doctor. And be aware that cannabis for non-medicinal purposes is still illegal in Australia.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Musculoskeletal Australia
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

Reference

¹ Australian Rheumatology Association. ARA Position Statement on the use of medicinal cannabis for musculoskeletal pain. In: Association. AR, ed. Sydney: Australian Rheumatology Association; 2016.
<https://rheumatology.org.au/downloads/FinalARAPositionStatementMedicalCannabis.pdf>

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

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