PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

About Medical Cannabis

This information explains what cannabis (KA-nuh-bis) is and how it's used. Cannabis is also called marijuana (MAYR-ih-WAH-nuh).

About Cannabis

Cannabis is a type of plant. It makes a resin (a thick, sticky substance) with chemicals that can affect your body. These chemicals are called cannabinoids (kuh-NA-bih-noyds). Your body also makes some cannabinoids on its own.

There are 2 main active cannabinoids in cannabis:

- **Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).** THC affects the parts of your brain that control nausea (feeling like you're going to throw up), appetite, memory, and focus. It can also affect your immune system. THC causes the "high" you feel after using cannabis.
- **Cannabidiol (CBD).** CBD affects the parts of your brain that control mood, pain, and sleep. It can also make the cannabinoids your body makes stay active for longer. CBD doesn't make you feel high.

We don't fully understand many of THC and CBD's effects, especially their effect on the immune system.

It's possible to buy cannabis products with CBD, THC, or both. For more information, read the section "Buying Medical Cannabis."

Medical Cannabis Uses

Medical cannabis may help you manage cancer-related symptoms. This includes chronic (long-lasting) pain, serious nausea, and losing too much weight. You can also use CBD topically (on your skin) as an anti-inflammatory. It may help treat pain from peripheral neuropathy (peh-RIH-feh-rul noor-AH-puh-thee) or other muscle or body aches. Some people also find that CBD helps them sleep.

Medical cannabis comes in many forms, such as:

- Vape pens (electronic devices that heat liquid into a vapor you breathe in).
- Dried, ground leaves. This form of cannabis is sometimes called “flower.”
- Pills, including capsules and tablets.
- Lozenges (tablets that melt in your mouth).
- Oils.
- Powders.

It’s best to avoid forms of cannabis meant to be breathed in or used as a suppository. A suppository is a medication you put inside your rectum.

Talk with your healthcare provider about your CBD and THC use. Both of these chemicals can affect the way other medications work.

Side effects of medical cannabis

The side effects of medical cannabis are different for everyone. They depend on the form of cannabis you're taking. Some common side effects are:

- Drowsiness (feeling sleepy).
- Restlessness (feeling like you can't relax or get comfortable).
- Anxiety (strong feelings of worry or fear).
- Paranoia (strong thoughts or feelings that someone might try to harm you).
- Hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't there).
- Feeling hungry.
- Short-term memory loss.
- Euphoria (feeling very happy or excited).
- Trouble focusing.
- Changes in your blood pressure.
- Faster heart rate.
- Confusion.
- Nausea.
- Vomiting (throwing up).
- Flushing (when your skin becomes red or warm).
- Depression (strong feelings of sadness).
- Insomnia (trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or waking up too early).

Talk with your healthcare provider if you're worried about any of these side effects.

Buying Medical Cannabis

The laws for buying and using cannabis, THC, and CBD are different in each state. The information in this section is true for people living in New York or New Jersey.

You can buy products with CBD from hemp at your local pharmacy or health food store. Hemp is a type of cannabis with little or no THC. It doesn't make you feel high.

You don't need a prescription or certification to buy CBD products. Quality varies, so look for a certified company that makes high-quality CBD products. Visit https://ushempauthority.org/#certified-companies to see a list of certified companies.

To get products with THC, you need to be certified by a licensed healthcare provider in the state where you live. For example, suppose you live in New Jersey but get your cancer treatment in New York. In that case, your New York healthcare provider can't certify you to buy medical cannabis. A healthcare provider in New Jersey must certify you, and you must buy your medical cannabis in New Jersey. Talk with your healthcare provider for more information.

Certification isn't the same as a prescription. Once you're certified, you can go to a medical dispensary. A dispensary is a place where medical cannabis is sold. The dispensary pharmacist will talk with you and suggest a product.

Medical cannabis certification in New York State

Follow these steps to be certified to buy medical cannabis in New York State.

1. Your healthcare provider must certify you to buy medical cannabis. This means they'll talk with you about medical cannabis. If you're approved to take it, they'll give you a certification form with information.
2. Use the certification form to register as a patient with the New York State Department of Health (NYS DOH). Visit https://cannabis.ny.gov/patients and select "Get Certified as a Patient" for instructions.
3. Once you have registered and your application is done, you must wait for approval. Some people may be approved right away. Others may need to wait a few days.
4. Once your application is approved, you will be able to use a temporary registry identification (ID) card. You will get your official registry ID card in the mail in 7 to 10 business days. Until then, you can use your temporary ID card to buy medical cannabis from a state-approved medical dispensary.
    - Visit https://cannabis.ny.gov/dispensing-facilities to see a list of registered medical dispensaries in New York State.
    - **You must bring your registry ID card and a photo ID (such as a driver's license) to the medical dispensary.**

Medical cannabis cost

The cost of medical cannabis depends on many things. It depends on how much you get, what form you get, and the prices at the medical dispensary. You can call the medical dispensary for more information about costs.

Medical cannabis usually is not covered by insurance. You will need to pay for it out-of-pocket (with your own money). Because cannabis is illegal under federal law, you can't buy medical cannabis with a credit card. You must pay with cash.

More Information

New York State
https://cannabis.ny.gov/patients
This webpage has information about New York State's Medical Cannabis Program.

New Jersey
https://www.nj.gov/cannabis/medicinalcannabis/
This webpage has information about New Jersey's Medicinal Cannabis Program.

National Cancer Institute (NCI)
www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/cam/patient/cannabis-pdq
This webpage has information about cannabis and cannabinoids.

MSK Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service
www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine/herbs/cannabis
This webpage from MSK's About Herbs database has information about cannabis.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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