



Cannabis and HIV/AIDS:

1. The Medicinal Use of Cannabis

Included in this series of fact sheets on Cannabis and HIV/AIDS:

1. The Medicinal Use of Cannabis
2. How to Apply to Use Medicinal Cannabis Legally
3. How to Speak to your Doctor about Medicinal Cannabis
4. Information Sheet for Physicians
5. Where to Find Cannabis for Medicinal Purposes
6. A Few Tips for Safer Use and Better Health
7. Cooking with Cannabis
8. Tips for Growing Cannabis Safely
9. How to Deal with the Stigma and Discrimination of Cannabis Use

What is cannabis?

Cannabis, or marijuana, is a plant that contains over 60 active ingredients called “cannabinoids”. The major active and commonly known cannabinoid is “THC”, which stands for delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol.

There are hundreds of varieties or “strains” of cannabis. Two main types of cannabis are of interest for people who seek its medicinal properties: *cannabis sativa* and *cannabis indica*. The different strains of cannabis contain different blends of cannabinoids. Many people report experiencing

different medicinal effects from different strains. There is not much research into the medicinal effects of different strains. Most people rely on word of mouth and trial and error to choose a strain that works for them. Your best bet is to try one to see how it works for your symptoms.

Contact Information:

These fact sheets have been prepared by the Canadian AIDS Society, in consultation with a National Steering Committee and a Legal Consultant. They are easily photocopied. We encourage you to distribute them widely.

For updates on these fact sheets, or for more information, please visit our web site at <www.cdnaids.ca/cannabis> or contact us at:

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How is cannabis used medicinally?

Currently, an estimated 14% to 37% of people living with HIV/AIDS use cannabis to help with some of their symptoms. You may be one of them.

People living with HIV/AIDS report many reasons for using cannabis: to stimulate their appetite, to help with nausea and vomiting, to manage pain, to relax, to help with anxiety, to improve their mood, to help with depression, to help manage their weight, to help stick to their medication regimen, to help with sleep, and others. Cannabis is not for everyone. You need to determine whether or not it is right for you.

Scientific research has been limited and slow to study the effects of cannabis on these symptoms. At this

time, we know that cannabis is helpful with the stimulation of appetite, and relieves nausea and vomiting. Relief of nausea may help you stick to your medication regimen. Some types of pain that don't respond well to other medications are sometimes relieved with cannabis. Many people report using cannabis to cope with depression, anxiety, stress and other psychological effects; however, there is not much research in this area. Please refer to the fact sheet on “A Few Tips for Safer Use and Better Health”.

How can you use cannabis legally to manage your symptoms?

Cannabis is a controlled substance in Canada which means that it is illegal to possess it, cultivate it, traffic it, possess it for the purpose of trafficking, import it, and export it.

Health Canada has developed the *Marihuana Medical Access Regulations* to enable compassionate access to cannabis for medicinal purposes. You can obtain an Authorization to Possess cannabis legally for medicinal purposes. You can also obtain a

License to Produce cannabis for yourself, or you can designate someone to grow cannabis for you and only you. Please refer to the fact sheet on “How to Apply to Use Medicinal Cannabis Legally” and “Tips for Growing Cannabis”.

Are there any risks in using cannabis?

Cannabis is a relatively safe plant. The toxicity of cannabis is so low that you would need to consume 682 kg (1500 pounds) of cannabis in 15 minutes to die of an overdose, and even that has never been proven. (Do not try this at home!)

To put it in perspective, the lethal dose for salt is about 0.2 kg. There has never been a single death attributed to cannabis in the thousands of years it has been used by humans. This said, it is still possible to consume too much cannabis, in the sense that the experience can be unpleasant for some people.

Too much cannabis

It is possible to consume too much when smoking or eating cannabis, NOT in the sense that it may kill you, but consuming too much cannabis can be unpleasant. Caution must be taken especially when eating food that contains cannabis. Please refer to the fact sheet on “Cooking with Cannabis” for more information.

A person who has consumed too much cannabis may become dizzy, agitated, nervous, or paranoid. When this happens, the person should be kept calm and reassured that this too shall pass. The most intense feelings will last about an hour and the effects of the cannabis should wear off in about 4 or 5 hours. While they are not in physical danger, they may feel chilly. If so, keep them warm. Most people fall asleep quickly after consuming too much cannabis.

Things you should be aware of:

- **HIV Meds:**

For those of you on protease inhibitors, you will be happy to know that studies completed to date have not found any harmful effects or interactions between protease inhibitors and the use of cannabis. Keep in mind that these studies were short-term. One study even showed an improvement of the immune function. If your meds make you nauseous, one study showed that cannabis can help you better stick to your medication schedule. It is a good idea to inform your doctor of your use of cannabis for medicinal purposes so that they have the full information about your therapy. Doctors and pharmacists may also be able to provide you with the latest information about possible negative interactions with your medication.

- **Smoking:**

Most people smoke cannabis to get the desired effects. Of course, smoking cannabis has long-term effects on the lungs, similar to those of smoking tobacco: lung irritation, coughing and the production of phlegm. However, a link between smoking cannabis and chronic lung diseases or cancer has not been established. Cannabis smoke does not have the same

effects as tobacco smoke and scientists are still trying to understand the different effects on the body. If you are concerned about the effects of smoking on your health, please refer to the fact sheet on “A Few Tips for Safer Use and Better Health”.

- ***Contamination of Cannabis:***

Some moulds, bacteria or other contaminants may grow on your cannabis, whether the plant is still growing, or has been harvested and stored. While some of these organisms are harmless, others may be very toxic and dangerous to your health. They can cause serious lung infections, cancers and other health issues. People get infected by breathing them in when smoking or by contact with the mouth. Even the burning of the cannabis when smoking does not kill the dangerous toxins. It is best not to take a chance. If your cannabis has darkened in colour, or if you see some white, grey, black, or even blue-green, sometimes fuzzy mould growing on your weed, throw it out, just like you would mouldy food! You may also notice a stale or musty smell, and the cannabis may feel warm

to the touch. **Note:** Trichomes are little white glands that grow all over the cannabis plant and contain the cannabinoids. These glands are NOT dangerous. They give the plant a frosty look. If you are not sure whether you are looking at trichomes or mould, please consult the internet, books, or speak with someone who could help you.

- ***Dependence:***

While there is no physical dependence from cannabis use, some people do develop a psychological dependence to cannabis. Please consult the fact sheet on “A Few Tips for Safer Use and Better Health” for more information.

- ***Withdrawal Symptoms:***

There are no significant withdrawal effects when cannabis use is stopped or decreased. Some people may experience sleeplessness, irritability, and loss of appetite. These symptoms usually disappear after a few days.

Is cannabis right for you?

If you have a history of psychiatric illness, especially schizophrenia, or if mental illness runs in your family, cannabis may trigger some of these tendencies.

If you have **high blood pressure** or **heart disease**, cannabis may increase your risks as it does tend to speed up the heart rate. If you are using **medications of any kind**, cannabis may interact with your medication. It is best to discuss your cannabis use with your health care practitioners or pharmacist, just

to be sure. If you have a **history of struggling with substance use**, you may wish to seek counselling to help you integrate cannabis in your life in a healthy way. Please refer to the fact sheet on “A Few Tips for Safer Use and Better Health.”

Useful Resources:

- **Canadian AIDS Society:** <www.cdnaids.ca/cannabis> for an electronic copy of these fact sheets and other relevant materials
- **Health Canada – Medical Use of Marijuana:** <www.healthcanada.gc.ca/mma>
- **Medical Marijuana Information Resource Centre:** <www.medicalmarijuanainformation.com>
- **VICS Medical Cannabis Guide:** <www.thevics.com/publications/vics/VICSMedsGuide2005.pdf>
- **Canadians for Safe Access:** <www.safeaccess.ca>
- **Cannabis Health Magazine:** <www.cannabishealth.com>
- **Medical Cannabis Resource:** <www.medicalmarihuana.ca> or <www.medicalcannabis.ca>



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