

Medicinal Cannabis

A Guide for Australian Patients

This patient information guide provides general information about medicinal cannabis and does not replace the professional advice from your doctor. Patients considering whether medicinal cannabis is an option for them, are encouraged to seek further information or explanation from their health care professional.

Table of contents

- | | | | |
|-----------|--|-----------|--|
| 04 | How medicinal cannabis works in the body | 20 | Medicinal cannabis products available in Australia |
| 08 | Consuming medicinal cannabis: Methods of ingestion | 22 | Be prepared |
| 10 | How dried flowers differ from oil and softgels | 24 | Tips for staying safe |
| 12 | Finding the right dose: Start low, go slow | 28 | Access to medicinal cannabis in Australia |
| 18 | Understanding cannabinoid ratios | 32 | Your dosing diary |

How to talk with your doctor about medicinal cannabis

Some patients find it difficult to talk with their doctor about medicinal cannabis. Your doctor is genuinely interested in your well-being and can help you understand whether medicinal cannabis is an option for you.

The following are some points to consider prior to speaking with your doctor.

Be prepared

Preparation will help you talk to your doctor. Medicinal cannabis has been used for many conditions, from chronic pain to sleep disorders.

This guide is intended to provide patients with general information about medicinal cannabis. This guide does not provide medical advice, and does not support any form of self-medication. Always listen to your doctor's advice as they understand your medical history.

This guide provides basic information about medicinal cannabis to help patients have a more informed discussion with their doctor. This information contained in this guide does not act as medical advice or support any form of self medication.



How medicinal cannabis works in the body

Active ingredients: Cannabinoids and terpenes

Cannabinoids are the main active ingredients in cannabis and more than 100 have been identified. Cannabinoids can be produced by the human body (endocannabinoids), found in plants (phytocannabinoids), or manufactured in a laboratory (synthetic cannabinoids) for use in some prescription medications.

Here, we will focus on cannabinoids found in the cannabis plant, called phytocannabinoids.

Phytocannabinoids are concentrated in sticky crystals on the flowers of the female cannabis plant, called trichomes. These trichomes are separated from the plant material when making extracts, including cannabis oil.

THC (Δ^9 -tetrahydrocannabinol) and CBD (cannabidiol) are the two most-researched and well-understood cannabinoids. Cannabis varieties (also known as strains) differ in their THC and CBD levels and in the ratio of THC to CBD. Therapeutic benefits will vary depending on a patient's biology and the product selected.

THC

Research shows that THC may be helpful for things such as pain relief from nausea, reduction of spasticity, and improving appetite. THC is also responsible for the euphoric or the psychoactive effects of cannabis.

CBD

CBD may be helpful for reducing inflammation, seizures, and anxiety and improving sleep. It does not cause the intoxicating, euphoric effects that can be caused by THC and may, in fact, reduce some of the potential side effects of THC, such as nervousness.

Cannabis isn't a one-size fits-all therapy. Many patients benefit from using more than one product, as for example, when they are medicating during the day versus the evening, or for different symptoms.

An informed and ongoing discussion between a patient and their doctor is important to finding the right product and dose.

Activation of cannabinoids

To be effective, cannabinoids, CBD and THC need to be heat-activated in a process called decarboxylation. All cannabis oils and softgels available through the legal system contain cannabis oil that has been decarboxylated.

Terpenes and flavonoids

Terpenes and flavonoids are responsible for the scents and flavours of different cannabis varieties. Terpenes may have their own effects on the body as well as interacting with cannabinoids to create the unique properties of individual cannabis varieties.

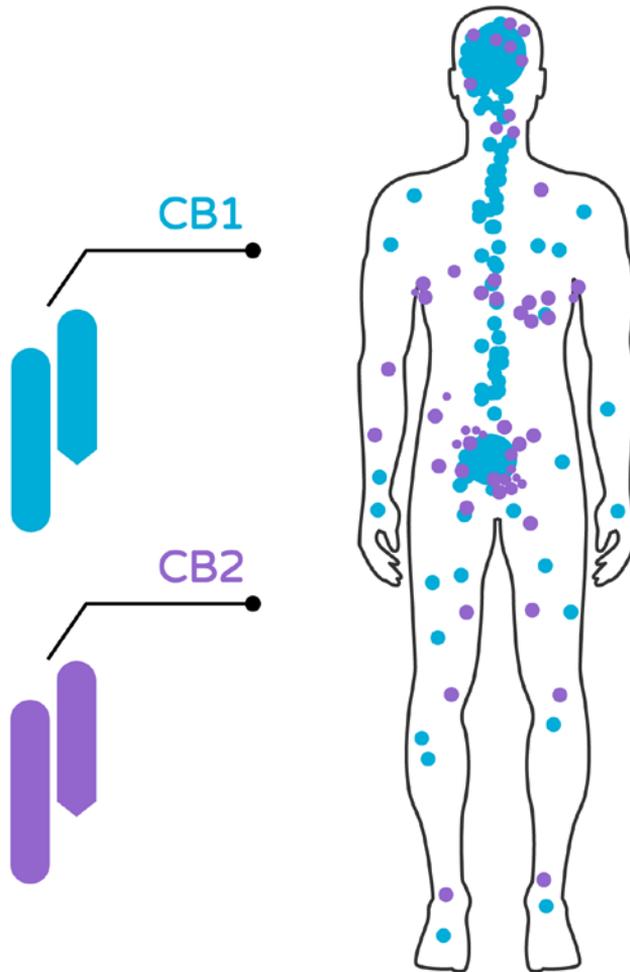
This is known as the entourage effect, a theory that describes the potential interactions between major cannabinoids, minor cannabinoids, terpenes, and other plant constituents.

The endocannabinoid system

Humans naturally produce cannabinoids (called endocannabinoids) that interact with cell receptors throughout the body. Endocannabinoids are like a key, receptors are like a lock, and they fit together to produce effects in the body.

This endocannabinoid system (ECS) is involved in many physiological functions, including inflammation, sleep, pain, memory, digestion, immune function, neuroprotection, and more.

The phytocannabinoids (e.g., THC and CBD) that are produced by the cannabis plant also interact with the receptors of your ECS. This could partly explain why cannabis seems to have an effect on such a wide range of symptoms and conditions.



Cannabinoid receptors are located on cell surfaces throughout the body.

Consuming medicinal cannabis: Methods of ingestion

Inhalation

Vaporising

When inhaling, the active ingredients are absorbed almost immediately into your bloodstream through the lungs, and the effects usually last 2–4 hours.

A vaporiser heats cannabis without burning it so that the active compounds are released into a vapour for inhalation, minimising exposure to the by-products from combustion.

If your doctor recommends a product that can be vaporised, ensure you are using a product from a licensed supplier listed on the Australian Government's Department of Health Office of Drug Control website (www.odc.gov.au). Work with your doctor to find suitable products that fit into this category.

Smoking cannabis is not recommended.

Ingestion

It's important that you start low, go slow when ingesting cannabis because the effects can be stronger and can last much longer than when inhaled. Cannabis oil can be taken directly from a syringe, measured according to the dosing insert that accompanies your product, or following the guidance of your doctor. Taking the oil on its own makes it easy to consume in a precise dose.

Cannabis oil and softgels can take 1–3 hours or longer to start working, depending on your metabolism and things such as whether you have eaten before consuming the oil. The effects can last 6–8 hours or longer. This can be useful at night if longer relief is required. Some patients may take 2–3 doses per day, but it's important to determine the correct single dose before taking more than 1 dose per day.

Cannabis oil and softgels are meant solely for ingestion and are NOT meant for inhalation nor for use in vaporisers.

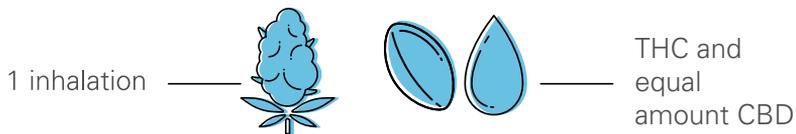
How dried flowers differ from oil and softgels

How dried flowers differ from oil and softgels

Inhaled

Ingested

STARTING DOSE



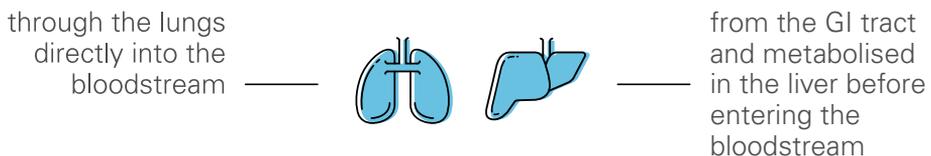
ONSET



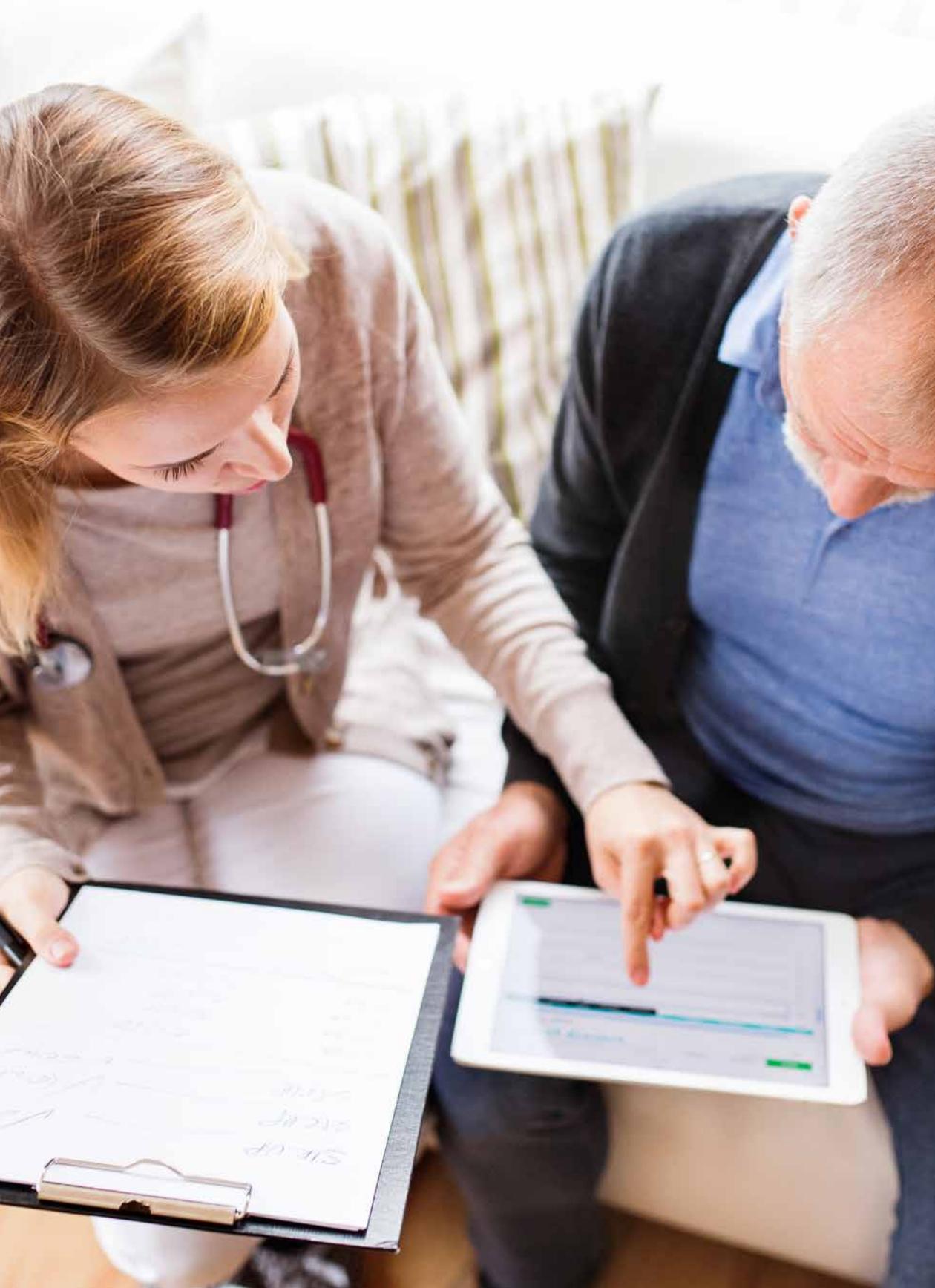
ESTIMATED DURATION OF EFFECT



HOW IT'S ABSORBED



**Finding the right dose:
Start low, go slow**



Ingestion

It's even more important to **start low, go slow** when ingesting cannabis.

Effects take 1–3 hours or longer to set in when cannabis is ingested (eaten) and the effects will last longer (6–8 hours or longer). Consult the dosing guidance that comes with your cannabis oil or softgels package. If you are unsure, you should call your doctor for guidance.

Vaporising

When you first try vaporising medicinal cannabis, or if you are trying a new variety, start with 1 inhalation and wait 15 minutes before consuming more. Increase by 1 inhalation every 15–30 minutes until the optimal dose is achieved. Observe how your symptoms are affected and how your mind and mood feel, before deciding to take more. This should be recorded in your cannabis dosing diary.

Getting started with THC

If THC is part of your treatment regimen, you should start with a small dose such as 2.5 mg of THC once per day and increase by 2.5 mg of THC only once a day until the desired effects have been reached.

You should record how long it takes for the effects to be felt and how long they last to find the right single dose before attempting to consume more than once daily. See the dosing diary on pg. 32.

Getting started with CBD

If CBD is part of your treatment regimen, you should start with 5 mg CBD once per day and increase by 5 mg CBD on Day 2 if necessary and repeat each day until the desired effects have been reached.

You may need to take more than one dose per day for a few days before you feel an effect on your symptoms.

Double dosing

Adverse effects are experienced most commonly when you take your first dose and, after feeling no immediate apparent effect, decide to take more. In reality, it takes time to feel the effects of ingested cannabis, and this can result in cumulative dosing, in which you feel the effects of both doses at once.

Avoid cumulative dosing and uncomfortable effects by waiting until the next day to increase the dose, if required. It could take a week or longer for you to determine your ideal dose, but this way unwanted effects should be avoided or at least minimised.

Effects for different patients may vary, even with the same cannabis product. Individuals may experience different effects from one day to the next depending on delivery method and personal factors such as food consumption and sleep. Refer to dosing guidelines provided by your doctor.



Understanding cannabinoid ratios

Cannabinoid ratios

When you're starting out with medicinal cannabis, it is important to look at the cannabinoid ratio and always start with a low THC variety and slowly work your way up or down depending on your results.

This way you will reduce the chances of any uncomfortable feelings if you experience euphoria. CBD may lessen the possible anxiety some patients feel from THC.

Indica and Sativa

The terms "indica" and "sativa" are botanical terms that describe the morphology (shape) of different cannabis plants, but they are also often used to characterise the range of possible effects from a variety of cannabis. Some people use the term "indica" to describe effects that are more sedating or physical in nature. Some people use the term "sativa" to describe effects that are more cerebral or energising.

These terms can be a useful reference, but they are not scientifically valid.

Medicinal cannabis products available in Australia

Cannabis oil

Concentrated cannabis resin, containing cannabinoids and other active compounds, is extracted from cannabis flowers that have undergone thermal decarboxylation, then diluted with a food-grade carrier oil to make a product for you to take orally from a syringe. This allows you to know exactly how much THC and CBD you are taking in each dose.

Softgels

Softgels are filled with cannabis resin dissolved in food-grade carrier oil. They offer you a convenient and discreet option for your medication.

Dried flowers

Dried cannabis is typically offered as either dried whole flowers (“bud”) or milled (“prepared” or “ground”). Whole flowers from the female cannabis plant are harvested, the stem and leaves are trimmed, and then the flowers are dried to a specific moisture content. Milled cannabis contains the same active ingredients as dried whole flowers and is ready for use in a vapourise.

Be prepared

Short-term effects

When first trying cannabis, or a new variety, you may experience some of the following feelings:

- ▶ Increased heart rate
- ▶ Dizziness
- ▶ Impaired coordination and reaction times
- ▶ Drowsiness
- ▶ Impaired short-term memory
- ▶ Dry mouth
- ▶ Nausea
- ▶ Anxiety
- ▶ Respiratory irritation (if inhaled)
- ▶ Increased appetite
- ▶ Euphoria

If you have taken too much

If you experience things like anxiety, nausea, dizziness, vomiting, or fainting, it is important that you don't panic. You should focus on your breathing, stay hydrated, eat something, and find a safe place to relax.

The effects should wear off in 2-6 hours depending on the method of consumption. If health and safety become a concern contact your prescribing doctor immediately. Should you experience things like chest pain, or persistent vomiting or dizziness causing falls, you should go to a hospital emergency room.

If you stop using medicinal cannabis

If you stop using medicinal cannabis, you may experience increased dreaming, sleep disturbances, appetite changes, and mood changes. You may also experience irritability, stomach upset, headache, and lack of appetite. These effects do not tend to last more than a few days. You may also expect that the symptoms that were being managed by cannabis will return when you stop using cannabis.

Tips for staying safe

Some recommendations to keep yourself safe when using medicinal cannabis.

Don't smoke!

If you and your doctor have agreed that inhalation is the right option for you, always use a vaporiser to minimise exposure to harmful compounds produced by combustion. This will minimise risks of long-term use.

Know where it comes from

Always use medicinal cannabis from a trusted source to avoid contaminants such as moulds, mildews, bacteria, and fungi; residue from pesticides and fungicides; and carcinogenic solvents used in unregulated extracts.

Talk about possible drug interactions

Be sure to tell your doctor which prescription medicines, non-prescription medicines, or herbal products you are currently taking. Cannabis may interact with several medications, particularly any drugs that slow down the central nervous system, causing drowsiness.

Talk about progress with your doctor

Once you've found the right dose and product for you, and your symptoms improve, you may be able to reduce, taper, or discontinue previous medications by replacing them with medicinal cannabis for the same symptom or condition. Be sure to talk to your doctor about changing the use of any of your other prescription medications. If your condition is worsening when you use cannabis, you should stop and notify your authorising doctor.

Don't mix cannabis and alcohol

Do not consume cannabis and alcohol at the same time—their effects may magnify each other's, causing discomfort and inebriation.

Adverse effects

If you experience any adverse effects please contact your doctor or ring the Poisons Information Centre 13 11 26.

Driving on medicinal cannabis

Similar to other prescription drugs, medicinal cannabis can impair a patient's ability to operate machinery, therefore:

- ▶ Medicinal cannabis metabolises at varying rates and factors so it is important to discuss with your doctor how your prescription may affect your ability to drive safely
- ▶ Patients using any medicinal cannabis products should seek their doctor's advice before driving or operating machinery due to the risk of experiencing drowsiness. While drowsiness is not a known side effect of CBD alone, it may occur if the CBD interacts with other medications. Some medicinal cannabis products may also include THC, in which case there is a strict ban on driving and operating machinery.
- ▶ Each state and territory has its own regulatory guidelines for patients that suffer from serious and chronic medical conditions so it is important to check with your doctor to ensure you are fit to drive.

If you would like further guidance please call Medicines Line on: 1300 633 424 (1300 MEDICINE)

Store products responsibly

Always store your cannabis products where they can't be accessed by children or pets. Always label and securely store any food products containing cannabis.

Access to medicinal cannabis in Australia

Medicinal cannabis products are regulated as medicines in Australia and are therefore subject to legal requirements. Generally, medicines imported into, supplied in, and exported from Australia must be entered in the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG), which is administered by the TGA. Medicinal cannabis products not on the ARTG can be supplied through alternative pathways until more clinical evidence is gathered through clinical trials.

These alternative pathways are:

- ▶ Special Access Scheme (SAS); and
- ▶ Authorised Prescriber (AP).

For further information please visit <https://www.tga.gov.au/community-qa/medicinal-cannabis-products-patientinformation>

Sources:

<https://www.tga.gov.au/access-medicinal-cannabis-products-steps-using-access-schemes>

<http://anspec.com.au/pharmacists.php>

<https://www.tga.gov.au/community-qa/medicinal-cannabis-products-patient-information>

Australian medicinal cannabis legislation overview

Australian Federal Government legislation

- ▶ **February 2016:** The Australian Government passed amendments to the Narcotic Drugs Act which allow cannabis to be legally grown for medical and scientific purposes for the first time in Australia.
- ▶ **November 2016:** The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) moved cannabinoids, such as THC, from its Schedule 9 classification (prohibited drugs) to Schedule 8 (controlled drugs, alongside drugs such as morphine) and cannabidiol (CBD) to Schedule 4 (Prescription only medicine, alongside things like local anaesthetics, antibiotics and strong analgesics).
- ▶ **February 2017:** The Australian Government introduced a new scheme that would see an interim fast track on importation while local cultivation is taking place under Special Access Scheme Category B.
- ▶ **January 2018:** The Australian Government announced it will be passing legislation that will allow the export of medicinal cannabis.

State and territory legislation

Each state and territory has its own laws surrounding its prescription, usage and accessibility;

Victoria: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/drugs-andpoisons/medicinal-cannabis>

New South Wales: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/pharmaceutical/Pages/cannabis-products.aspx>

Queensland: <https://www.health.qld.gov.au/public-health/topics/medicinal-cannabis>

Western Australia: https://ww2.health.wa.gov.au/Articles/A_E/Cannabis-based-products

South Australia: <http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/health+topics/health+conditions+prevention+and+treatment/medicines/medicinal+cannabis/frequently+asked+questions+on+medicinal+cannabis>

Tasmania: http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/psbtas/publications/medical_cannabis/medical_cannabis_controlled_access_scheme

Northern Territory: <https://health.nt.gov.au/professionals/environmental-health/therapeutic-medicines-containingcannabinoids-medicinal-cannabis>

Australian Capital Territory: <http://health.act.gov.au/publicinformation/businesses/pharmaceutical-services/medicinal-cannabis>

Sources: <https://www.odc.gov.au/qa> <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/medical-cannabis/>

Your dosing diary

Tracking use

Keeping a diary is the key to getting the best results from medicinal cannabis. For the first few weeks—and every time you use a new variety or product—record how your symptoms and mood are affected before and after using cannabis. This diary will also provide valuable information to help keep your doctor informed on your progress with medicinal cannabis.

Notes

Date / /

Product information		
<p>Form</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  Oil </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  Softgels </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  Flower </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  Milled </div> </div>	<p>THC</p>	<p>CBD</p>
	Flower (%) _____	_____
	Oil (mg/ml) _____	_____
	Softgels (mg) _____	_____
<p>Dose consumed</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  _____ inhalation(s) </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  _____ ml </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  _____ number </div> </div>	<p>Time of use</p> <div style="text-align: right;"> _____ AM _____ PM </div>	
	<p>Was it effective?</p>	Yes No
Duration of effects		
<p>Effects on symptoms</p>	<p>Unwanted effects</p>	
<p>Symptom Scale</p> <p>Indicate the intensity of your primary symptom by circling the appropriate number from 1 (mild) to 10 (severe).</p> <p>Symptom _____</p> <p>Before</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</p> <p>After</p> <p>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</p>	<p>Comments</p>	

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