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Is Medical Cannabis the Right Choice for You and Your MS?

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Although federally illegal, cannabis is legal in many states. Medical cannabis is becoming more accessible, and you may be wondering whether it is an option to help manage your multiple sclerosis symptoms.

People who live with MS use medical cannabis for the same reasons those with other chronic diseases do: to manage symptoms. Medical cannabis can be used to manage spasticity and pain for individuals with MS.

However, according to Dr. Michelle Cameron, a neurologist, physical therapist and professor at Oregon Health & Science University, “there are no FDA-approved cannabis-based medications for MS symptoms in the U.S.”

Before you start your journey with cannabis, Cameron says it's important to be educated and have all the information to help you make the best decision. Having conversations with your doctor and doing research about potential side effects are necessary to successfully navigate medical cannabis.

Staying Within the Law

Cannabis is currently a Schedule I substance under the [Controlled Substances Act](#) [7](#) . Schedule I substances are defined as drugs with no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse.

Although cannabis has been a Schedule I substance since the 1970s, there has recently been talk about [moving it down to be a Schedule III substance](#) [7](#) . This new classification could reduce federal limitations, acknowledge the potential for cannabis' therapeutic and medical benefits and open the door for further research. Cannabis would remain subject to federal regulations and laws under either classification.

It is also important to remember that, while medical cannabis might be legal and accessible in [your area](#) [7](#) , taking cannabis may affect your job or personal life. Always be sure to check your workplace regulations to make sure you are not in danger of negative action from your job, should you choose to use it.

How Medical Cannabis Works

Marijuana and cannabis are interchangeable terms and are used to describe a physical plant, according to Cameron. Cannabinoids are the chemicals in the plant that act on your nervous system. The term “medical” refers to cannabis that is taken for medical use.

According to Cameron, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD) are compounds found in the cannabis plant. THC is the more psychoactive form, which changes how your brain works and causes people to become high. CBD has minimal psychotropic effects and is not intoxicating. Short-term dose-dependent side effects of CBD include drowsiness, diarrhea and loss of appetite. There are not enough existing studies about the long-term side effects of CBD.

Methods of Using Cannabis

There are 3 primary methods of using cannabis.

1. **Edible cannabis** can be in the form of gummies, cookies or other types of food you consume.
2. **Inhaled cannabis** is any cannabis that is smoked.
3. **Topical cannabis** is put on your skin, usually in the form of lotions, creams or bath products.

Studies have only shown that non-inhaled cannabinoids may provide a modest benefit in controlling pain and spasticity. Less is known about the impact on MS symptoms of inhaling or consuming the cannabis plant, but the risks of inhaled products outweigh the benefits.

Side Effects of Cannabis

Cannabinoids may help with your MS symptoms, particularly spasticity and pain, but there is also a potential for side effects.

“It’s not risk-free,” Cameron says. “Recognize it’s a balancing act.” Always make sure to discuss with your healthcare team to see if the benefits outweigh the risks for you.

There are 4 main side effects experienced with medical cannabis use outlined by Cameron:

- Slower thought process
- Unsteadiness, especially if you already struggle with balance
- Hunger, usually called “the munchies”
- Negative interaction with other medications

These side effects can vary with dosage and look different from person to person. It is important to talk with your doctor before trying medical cannabis, especially if you take multiple medications.

Addiction is also something that many people consider when taking cannabis. Approximately 9% of cannabis users develop cannabis use disorder, which is the continued use of the substance despite adverse effects.


According to Cameron, signs you may be developing cannabis use disorder include, “you’re losing your job, you’re spending money, it’s making you more anxious rather than less anxious, or it’s making your life worse, but you’re still doing it.”

Engage in Shared Decision-Making With Your Healthcare Team

Every person's experience with medical cannabis will be different - from types of side effects to the severity of side effects and the correct dosage.

"If you're using cannabis or cannabinoids for any reason or you're thinking about it, please discuss this with your physician," Cameron says. "I know it's not the most comfortable conversation to start, but it's better to have it than to just be doing it and your provider doesn't know."

People who are exploring treatment with medical cannabis must also consider state laws and employment implications, as well as the available clinical knowledge.

To learn more about medical cannabis and how to navigate the decision of using it as an individual with MS, listen to [Ask An MS Expert](#)  and read our [webpage on medical cannabis](#).

AbbyLane Kloke

A student at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, AbbyLane Kloke was a summer 2024 intern with the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

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