

Medical Cannabis

ARTHRITIS SOCIETY POSITION ON MEDICAL CANNABIS

It is the Arthritis Society's position that:

- ▼ Safety and improved care for people living with arthritis are our top priorities, with advocacy focused on improving access to care, timeliness of care, and innovative research.
- ▼ Medical cannabis offers a potential alternative to traditional pharmaceuticals for the treatment of chronic pain and other symptoms of arthritis.
- ▼ To ensure that the needs of people with arthritis are reflected in medical cannabis decisions in Canada, the Arthritis Society is directly active in, and/or advocating for, progress in the following areas:
 - Funding of medical cannabis research (basic, clinical, health services, policy)
 - Development and implementation of evidence-based clinical practice guidelines
 - Tax exemption for medical cannabis consistent with other medications
 - Pharmacy distribution of medical cannabis
 - Fair and equitable drug benefit coverage (both public and private plans)
- ▼ It is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the arthritis community – government, licensed sellers, health charities and other organizations – to fund research into the safety and efficacy of medical cannabis as a therapy for the management of arthritis symptoms.
- ▼ While there is more to learn, there is sufficient evidence already to accept the use of cannabis as medicine. As such, we believe cannabis must be treated as medicine by regulators with regard to guidance, distribution, taxation and coverage.

BACKGROUND

Medical cannabis and arthritis

- ▼ More than 6 million Canadians live with arthritis. The common denominator of their experience is chronic pain.
- ▼ As the current opioid crisis demonstrates, there is a concerning lack of adequate pain management solutions available for people living with chronic disease.
- ▼ Health Canada reports that “severe arthritis” is the diagnosis for more than half of Canadians authorized to possess herbal cannabis.
- ▼ There is growing evidence for the use of cannabis to treat symptoms of a variety of medical conditions. For example, cannabinoids have been found to reduce osteoarthritis pain, inflammation and nerve damage in animal models.
- ▼ However, due to considerable gaps in research into medical cannabis and its impact on arthritis, many health professionals are uncomfortable advising patients on the use of cannabis for medical purposes in the absence of clear evidence-based clinical guidelines.

Medical cannabis in Canada

- ▼ Cannabis has been legal in Canada for medical purposes since 2001, when the Canadian courts ruled that it was unconstitutional to force patients “to choose between (their) health and imprisonment.” In effect, the ruling forced the federal government to create a law and put regulations in place that allowed people to use herbal cannabis for legitimate medical needs.

- ▼ In 2014, the Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations (ACMPR) created the conditions for a commercial industry responsible for medical cannabis production and distribution. In 2018, the Cannabis Act – specifically [Part 14: Accessing Cannabis for Medical Purposes](#) – revised these conditions, maintaining a medical cannabis registration process separate from the legalization of non-medical cannabis.
- ▼ The supply of medical cannabis is controlled by the federal government, which regulates licensed sellers who manufacture and distribute product under strict oversight and control.
- ▼ Access for patients is obtained through a medical document from a prescribing physician (or nurse practitioner, in some jurisdictions), which outlines the daily use requirements and period of use.
- ▼ Medication is purchased from a licensed seller of their choice and delivered to the patient by courier as dried plant product, cannabis oil, pills – even live plants or seeds for ‘home grow’. Licensed sellers must demonstrate compliance with rigorous regulatory requirements, such as quality control standards, record-keeping and intensive security measures to protect against theft.
- ▼ Although the use of herbal cannabis for medical purposes has been regulated since 2001, it is important to note that the [Health Canada website](#) states “Cannabis is not an approved therapeutic product and the provision of this information should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the use of cannabis for therapeutic purposes, or of marijuana generally, by Health Canada.”

What is medical cannabis?

- ▼ The hemp plant *Cannabis sativa* (cannabis) is commonly known as marijuana and can be used as a therapy to alleviate symptoms such as pain and fatigue caused by chronic disease. Cannabis has a history of use as medicine dating back thousands of years across many cultures.

- ▼ Medical cannabis refers to the use for medical purposes of plant material (either whole or in extract form) that contains various cannabinoid molecules such as tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD).
 - These compounds interact with the body's own endocannabinoid system (CB1 and CB2 receptors in the brain and throughout the body on immune cells, respectively), which regulates things like pain, appetite, mood and memory.
 - THC has psychoactive (mind altering) and pain-relieving properties.
 - CBD may also reduce pain and inflammation while having no known psychoactive side-effects.
 - These compounds have been found to help manage symptoms of health concerns such as chronic pain, spasticity (in MS), and chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting.

- ▼ The family of cannabinoid molecules that may be used as treatments exist as either pharmaceutical preparations or herbal products derived from plant material.
 - Pharmaceutical preparations may be ingested as an oral preparation (pills) or as a spray applied to the inside of the mouth. Pharmaceutical preparations are based on the molecules THC and CBD. Pharmaceutical cannabinoids have undergone clinical trials to demonstrate safety and effectiveness and have been approved for various conditions through the rigorous process associated with Canada's Food and Drugs Act.
 - Herbal cannabis in contrast is not pharmaceutically manufactured and is comprised of the dried leaves and flowers of the plant *Cannabis sativa*. Herbal cannabis may be ingested, inhaled or applied locally. Research and clinical trials of herbal cannabis are very limited and, as a result, both positive and negative effects have not been clearly determined.

ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH MEDICAL CANNABIS

Clinical guidelines and the need for research

- ▼ The Arthritis Society funds, and support calls for, high-quality research into the safety and effectiveness of this treatment, so that Canadians with arthritis and their physicians can together make evidence-based, informed decisions about a treatment path. The Arthritis Society was the first health charity in Canada to fund medical cannabis research.
- ▼ More research is needed. A research roundtable the Arthritis Society hosted in December 2015 identified the following priority areas for cannabis research, which help inform the place of cannabis in our research strategy:
 - Basic research
 - Clinical research
 - Health services
 - Policy
- ▼ According to the Canadian Consortium for the Investigation of Cannabinoids (ccic.net), while there are some clinical studies taking place in Canada into cannabis and fibromyalgia, there are currently none examining the effects of medical cannabis on arthritis.
- ▼ Along with a group of concerned stakeholders in the health community representing patients, clinicians and scientists, the Arthritis Society has called on the Federal government to increase funding for medical cannabis research.

Affordability and distribution

- ▼ The Arthritis Society believes that medical cannabis must be treated the same as other federally regulated medications in Canada. Specifically:
 - It should be prescribed by physicians;
 - It should be distributed through licensed pharmacies;
 - It should be free from taxation (both sales and excise) in all forms and potencies; and
 - It should be eligible for coverage under public and private (both personal and employee) drug benefits plans.

- ▼ Sales and excise taxes on medical cannabis will cost the typical patient almost \$2,000 per year based on average dosage.

- ▼ Some patients are left with an impossible choice between receiving the medication their doctor has recommended and paying their rent or buying food – or switching to other medications such as opioids that may not be as effective or may have serious side effects.

- ▼ Other prescription drugs and medical necessities are tax exempt – only medical cannabis patients are subjected to this unjustifiable indignity.

- ▼ The government claims it wants to keep recreational users from abusing the medical system to obtain cheaper cannabis. The solution to a few people potentially abusing the medical system is to beef up the scrutiny in the system, not to penalize thousands of legitimate patients with a misguided policy.

- ▼ Even government bodies like the Tax Court of Canada and the Federal Court of Appeal recognize that taxing medical cannabis is unfair, saying it creates “uncertainty and confusion”, and that “this area of legislation needs work”.

- ▼ Similarly, medical cannabis should be treated like other medications in being eligible for drug benefits coverage from both public and private drug plans.
 - No public drug plans currently cover medical cannabis costs.
 - Few private or employee drug plans currently cover medical cannabis, although more are starting to do so based on pressure from plan members.
 - The Arthritis Society is the first health charity to cover medical cannabis for its employees, and we have made our coverage plan available as a template for other employers to use in building medical cannabis coverage for their own employees.

Product naming

- ▼ Pharmaceutical cannabinoids each have a formal International Non-proprietary Name (INN) as issued by the World Health Organization. Three pharmaceutical cannabinoids have been approved for use by Health Canada:
 - Cesamet (nabilone), Meda Pharmaceuticals
 - Marinol (dronabinol), Solvay Pharma (not currently available in Canada)
 - Sativex (nabiximols), GW Pharmaceuticals
- ▼ The naming of various types of herbal cannabis, which may vary in the amounts of THC and CBD, is not uniform or regulated and is entirely decided by the individual licensed seller or grower, creating confusion for patients. Licensed sellers of herbal cannabis can market numerous strains and varieties of the product. Although not legally able to make health claims, licensed sellers are able to indicate the THC and CBD percentages in their strains, but without any evidence to support one strain over another.
- ▼ Given that the licensed sellers are not mandated to have a common naming structure, physicians and patients are faced with confusion.

Delivery methods

- ▼ Pharmaceutical cannabinoids are available in capsule form or as a spray that is applied to the inside of the mouth. The pharmacokinetics, which is the understanding of how the product is absorbed, how long it remains in the bloodstream and how it is eliminated from the body, has been studied for all the pharmaceutical cannabinoid preparations.
- ▼ There are multiple delivery methods for herbal cannabis which may alter the effect of the product and present a variety of side effects. Herbal cannabis may be ingested in the form of oils (such as used in food preparation) or inhaled using a vaporizer or by smoking. Faster onset of action is achieved via inhalation versus ingestion. The Arthritis Society does not recommend smoking.
- ▼ Sophisticated vaporizers are available for purchase, with one of the greatest drawbacks being the cost for the equipment. There is one such device approved by Health Canada for the consumption of herbal cannabis.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- ▼ Patient safety is paramount, and a patient-centered approach is crucial.
- ▼ Decisions about the use of medical cannabis must be in the hands of people living with arthritis and their physician.
- ▼ People living with arthritis and their physicians need to be armed with evidence-based guidelines to make informed choices about treatment options.
- ▼ The Arthritis Society's mandate in speaking out on the topic of medical cannabis is rooted directly in our vision of living in a world where people can be free from the devastating effects that arthritis can have on lives.
- ▼ The Arthritis Society will advance its mission by educating individuals living with arthritis on the complex and unique characteristics of medical cannabis. People living with

arthritis must be given timely, relevant and accurate information to make informed treatment decisions.

- ▼ The Arthritis Society is committed to ensuring that government decision makers have a clear understanding of the impact of medical cannabis on patients and that public policy is shaped to support individuals living with arthritis.

For further information contact:

Joanne Di Nardo / Kelly Gorman
Director, Public Policy and Government Affairs
Arthritis Society
393 University Avenue, Suite 1700
Toronto, ON M5G 1E6
Tel: 416-979-7228
Email: advocacy@arthritis.ca

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