

# MEDICAL CANNABIS

A Guide to Access



THE TREATMENT SERIES

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# Introduction

People living with arthritis are always looking for ways to better manage their disease and symptoms. Since 2001, medical cannabis has been a legal treatment option in Canada that many people with arthritis have sought to use. In fact, 65 per cent of Canadians authorized to possess medicinal cannabis do so because of a diagnosis of “severe arthritis.”\*



Since 2001, medical cannabis has been a legal medical treatment option in Canada.

The regulations for accessing medical cannabis were changed in 2014 and 2016, and The Arthritis

Society has created this booklet to explain what’s involved. Outlined in the pages that follow is the process to access medical cannabis legally in Canada. If you are considering this as a treatment option, there are suggested questions for you to ask your physician and licensed producer(s). Lastly, addressed here are frequently asked questions you may have about access. This information is intended to help you make informed decisions about your treatment options.

For additional information on medical cannabis, including The Arthritis Society’s position statement, please visit [arthritis.ca/medicalcannabis](http://arthritis.ca/medicalcannabis).

**NOTE:** Medical Cannabis is not a Health Canada approved treatment. To date, there is no clear evidence on the relative benefits and risks of medical cannabis on the treatment of arthritis. Medical cannabis should not be used by persons under 25. This document is intended for informational and educational purposes only. It is not intended to substitute the advice of a physician. Patients should always consult their physicians or other relevant professionals for specific information on personal health matters to ensure that their individual circumstances are considered.

\*Reference: June 2013 Access to Information Act request, reported by Health Canada

# The process to access medical cannabis

The Government of Canada's Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations (ACMPR) detail the process to acquire medical cannabis from a licensed producer. The Society encourages people living with arthritis to be informed about treatments and choices that affect their care. Outlined below is the process for accessing medical cannabis; begin by educating yourself on both the process and the treatment.



1. Do your homework
2. Talk to your physician
3. Select a licensed producer
4. Complete the paperwork
5. Submit the paperwork

## 1. Do your homework

Currently, there is no single comprehensive source of educational material about medical cannabis as a treatment option, so it is important to gather information from credible sources. Such sources include The Arthritis Society's website ([arthritis.ca/medicalcannabis](https://arthritis.ca/medicalcannabis)) and Health Canada's website ([www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/index-eng.php](https://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/index-eng.php)) as well as the "Resources"

section of this booklet (page 12). If you know people who have used medical cannabis as a treatment option, you may also wish to ask them about their experiences. The Arthritis Society's aim is to provide an overview of the process to access

medical cannabis as a treatment option so that you are aware of the health choices available to you.



## 2. Talk to your physician

The Society believes that decisions about the use of medical cannabis must be in the hands of people with arthritis and their physicians. In some provinces and territories, nurse practitioners may prescribe medical cannabis in accordance with their regulated scope of practice; however, in this document we will simply refer to physicians. To prepare for a conversation with your physician about medical cannabis as a treatment option, you may want to view The Society's online learning module: *You and Your Healthcare Provider: a Guide for Effective Conversations* ([arthritis.ca/education](http://arthritis.ca/education)).

You will likely need to discuss with your physician the reasons for considering medical cannabis as a treatment option.

Some suggested questions to ask your physician can be found on page 4. Your physician may or may not be able to answer

these questions for you, based on their own knowledge, experiences and comfort level with prescribing medical cannabis. If your physician is not familiar with the topic of medical cannabis, you may wish to learn more about medical cannabis together, continue to seek out information on your own or seek a second opinion from a physician who is more knowledgeable about and comfortable with medical cannabis as a treatment option. There is no right or wrong way to deal with this situation — only you will know what is right for you.



**The Society believes that decisions about the use of medical cannabis must be in the hands of people with arthritis and their physicians.**



## Questions to ask your physician

Some of the questions you may consider asking your physician include:

- Do you have other patients for whom you have prescribed medical cannabis as a treatment?
- What are the benefits of medical cannabis for arthritis?
- Are there side effects?
- Does medical cannabis affect depression, sleep or appetite?
- Can you recommend a specific strain or will you help me find the right strain to manage my particular symptoms?
- How do I take medical cannabis?
- How much should I take? Will you help me adjust my dosage level if needed?
- When should I take medical cannabis?
- How long will it take until I begin to feel any therapeutic effects? What are these effects and how long do they last?
- Will medical cannabis replace other medications that I currently take for my arthritis?
- How does this affect my everyday activities (work, driving, travelling)?
- Are there any tests that should be done before we decide that this might be an appropriate option?
- Do I need any monitoring or tests if we decide I should take medical cannabis?
- Can I be involved in any research studies?
- How long does a prescription last?

In some communities, medical cannabis clinics have begun to open, which may be able to offer you another perspective and a level of expertise in prescribing and monitoring medical cannabis. These clinics' services may not be covered by your provincial health plan, so inquire up front about any fees.

If you are already using medical cannabis for your arthritis, make sure your physician is aware (as he or she should be for all other medications you are taking) of what symptoms you are using it to address, how you take it, how often and in what dosage.

### 3. Select a licensed producer

Under the Government of Canada's Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations (ACMPR), the only legal sources of medical cannabis are:

1. directly from a licensed producer, or
2. cannabis grown at home from plants or seeds obtained from a licensed producer\*.

The Health Canada website ([www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/list-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/list-eng.php)) has a list of all licensed producers in Canada. It is important to ask a licensed producer questions before you make a decision about which licensed producer will supply your medical cannabis. Once your required forms are with a licensed producer, you cannot move your prescription until your prescription is finished so it's important to feel confident about your choice.



**Under the Government of Canada's ACMPR, a licensed producer is the only legal source of medical cannabis, plants or seeds.**

\*New in 2016.



## Questions to ask a licensed producer

Some questions you may wish to ask a licensed producer include:



- Do you have a wait list to register?
- What paperwork is required from my physician? From me?
- What types of strains do you provide and how are their effects different?
- What is the chemical composition of your strains (THC, CBD levels)?
- If a certain strain does not work well for me, can I change the strain I purchase?
- What forms of medical cannabis do you offer? (e.g., dried, oils, etc.) How should I use them to ensure accurate dosage?
- How much does your product cost per gram?
- Is there a maximum quantity that I can order at one time?
- How frequently can I place an order?
- How is your product delivered? Does it need to be delivered to my home or are there other options?
- How do you ensure safety, quality and consistency of your product?
- Do you have enough product to ensure there is no gap in my requirements?
- What are the regulations that you are required to follow?
- Do you have a patient support program to help me in case I have other questions?
- How do you protect my privacy with respect to the personal information you keep on file and the discretion of your shipping procedures and methods?
- Do you have any programs to help me if I have a limited income or if I am on disability?
- What training do your support staff have? Are they pharmacists/nurses, etc.?
- How do I report any adverse effects?



## 4. Complete the paperwork

The paperwork that is required to access medical cannabis as treatment has been set out in Health Canada's ACMPR. There are two requirements:

1. **Medical document from your physician.** Health Canada designates what information must be included in the medical document and provides a sample on its website ([www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/med-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/med-eng.php)). A medical document is essentially a prescription for medical cannabis. Licensed producers may also supply the medical document on their own template for you.

 Health Canada Santé Canada		Your health and safety... our priority. Votre santé et votre sécurité... notre priorité.	
<b>Sample Medical Document for the Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations</b>			
<small><i>This document may be completed by the applicant's health care practitioner as defined in the Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations (ACMPR). A health care practitioner includes medical practitioners and nurse practitioners. In order to be eligible to provide a medical document, the health care practitioner must have the applicant for the medical document under their professional treatment. Regardless of whether or not this form is used, the medical document must contain all of the required information, (see in particular s. 8 of the ACMPR).</i></small>			
Patient's Given Name and Surname	_____		
Patient's Date of Birth (DD/MM/YYYY)	_____		
Daily quantity of dried marihuana to be used by the patient:	_____ g/day		
The period of use is _____ day(s) _____ week(s) _____ month(s).			
<b>NOTE: The period of use cannot exceed one year</b>			
Health care practitioner's given name and surname:	_____		
Profession:	_____		
Health care practitioner's business address:	_____		
Full business address of the location at which the patient consulted the health care practitioner (if different than above):	_____		
Phone Number:	_____		
Fax Number (if applicable):	_____		
Email Address (if applicable):	_____		
Province(s) Authorized to Practice in:	_____		
Health Care Practitioner's Licence number:	_____		
<b>By signing this document, the health care practitioner is attesting that the information contained in this document is correct and complete.</b>			
Health Care Practitioner's Signature:	_____		
Date Signed (DD/MM/YYYY):	_____		
			

2. **Registration with licensed producer.** While the registration form may look different for different licensed producers, the same basic information will be collected from you, such as full name, birth date, phone number, address (and if that is the same

as your delivery address), caregiver's information (if you have one), health-care provider's name and office address. Additionally, you will need to certify a number of statements, confirming that: you are a resident of Canada, the information you provide is correct and complete, you will not seek medical cannabis from another source, the medical document is part of the application, you will be using their product for your own purposes and you understand the risks associated with medical cannabis.

## 5. Submit the paperwork to the licensed producer

The licensed producer will inform you of the process for submitting your completed paperwork, including your medical document and the licensed producer's required registration form(s). Once you submit your completed paperwork (or your physician submits it on your behalf),

the licensed producer will process your order. You will also need to provide payment information.



# Common questions about access

You may still have a number of questions about accessing medical cannabis. Below are some common questions and answers.

## 1. **How do I pay for medical cannabis? Is it covered by insurance?**

If you have private health insurance, you can ask if your provider covers the costs for medical cannabis, including the cost of a vaporizer or other devices you may need (e.g., Veterans Affairs Canada covers some expenses). If you do not have private insurance, you will need to cover the costs yourself and like other medical expenses, you may claim this cost on your personal tax return ([www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/ndvdl/tpcs/ncm-tx/rtrn/cmpltng/ddctns/lns300-350/330-331/dtlxpns-eng.html#mrjn](http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/ndvdl/tpcs/ncm-tx/rtrn/cmpltng/ddctns/lns300-350/330-331/dtlxpns-eng.html#mrjn)). Some licensed producers have compassionate pricing programs to assist individuals who may require financial assistance.

## 2. **How much does medical cannabis cost?**

The price of medical cannabis is not regulated; it is set by each licensed producer. In general, the cost ranges between \$5 and \$12 per gram. For home grow, the price of seeds and plants varies, as can other costs associated with “home grow.” In either case, ask your licensed producer for more information.

## 3. **If my doctor recommends a licensed producer, do I have to use that licensed producer?**

The decision of which licensed producer to use is up to you.

## 4. **How are my privacy and information protected?**

Licensed producers are subject to federal and provincial laws governing how your personal health information can be collected, used, stored and disclosed. In general, personal information can only be used for the purposes for which it was collected and it cannot be disclosed without your explicit consent. Each licensed producer is required to also have its own privacy policies and procedures and must identify a privacy officer who is responsible for compliance with this legislation. You can confirm any details you are concerned about by speaking directly to the privacy officer.

**5. I previously accessed cannabis through the Marihuana Medical Access Regulations (MMAR), how are the new regulations different?**

The ACMPR only allow access to medical cannabis through licensed producers. If you have an MMAR Authorization to Possess (ATP) card, you can approach a licensed producer to provide you with new documentation that will be valid until the same date on your current card. Once you transfer to a licensed producer under the new regulations, you cannot go back to accessing medical cannabis using the former regulations.

**6. What if my physician does not support my decision to seek medical cannabis as a treatment option?**

Ensure you understand your physician's perspective about why he or she does not support your choice. Your physician may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with medical cannabis as a treatment. Your physician may think other approaches should be tried first or that you have risk factors that make cannabis an unsafe choice. You may wish to pursue more information about medical cannabis together with your physician or on your own if this is not an option. Alternatively, you may want to find a physician who is open to the idea of pursuing medical cannabis as a treatment. In this situation, only you can decide the best course of action for you. In all cases, ensure that the physician evaluating you is licensed, conducts a thorough evaluation and will follow up with you to ensure a satisfactory response. Your doctor may advise that you discontinue medical cannabis if your condition worsens or if you experience side effects.

**7. Can I grow my own medical cannabis?**

The introduction of the ACMPR in 2016 made growing your own medical cannabis legal, under certain conditions. Plants and seeds must be sourced from a licensed producer, and you are limited in the number of plants you grow depending on your prescription and the yield expected from your growing conditions. For more information on home grow, including forms to apply, visit: [healthycanadians.gc.ca/drugs-products-medicaments-produits/buying-using-achat-utilisation/cannabis-medical/access-acces/personal-production-personnelle/index-eng.php](https://healthycanadians.gc.ca/drugs-products-medicaments-produits/buying-using-achat-utilisation/cannabis-medical/access-acces/personal-production-personnelle/index-eng.php).

# The need for research

Safety and improved care for people living with arthritis are The Arthritis Society's top priorities. Given the significant gaps in information about medical cannabis and its use in treating arthritis symptoms, The Society is actively supporting additional research, the goal of which is to provide patients and physicians with greater access to credible and complete information upon which to base treatment decisions.

Some of the questions about medical cannabis and arthritis that research will help us answer include:

- How does medical cannabis work?
- How effective is medical cannabis for managing pain and fatigue caused by arthritis? How does medical cannabis affect inflammation?
- If effective, what is the best delivery method?
- What factors affect dosage, delivery mode and efficacy? Do they vary depending on the patient, disease type or amount of pain being experienced?
- Does medical cannabis have any adverse interactions with other medications or conditions?
- Is it possible to separate the cannabinoid molecules that contribute to pain relief from those that have unwanted side effects?
- Which patients will benefit the most from medical cannabis?
- What are the risks associated with using medical cannabis?



# Resources

An explanation of medical cannabis and The Arthritis Society's position on it:

[arthritis.ca/medicalcannabis](http://arthritis.ca/medicalcannabis)

Health Canada's information on the process to access:

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/access-acceder-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/access-acceder-eng.php)

Health Canada's information for clients:

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/faq-eng.php#s1](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/faq-eng.php#s1)

Health Canada's document for Health Care Providers:

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/alt\\_formats/pdf/marihuana/med/infoprof-eng.pdf](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/alt_formats/pdf/marihuana/med/infoprof-eng.pdf)

Health Canada's list of licensed producers:

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/list-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/list-eng.php)

**NOTE:** Health professionals may also find it valuable to explore the resources of the Canadian Consortium for the Investigation of Cannabinoids, a not-for-profit that educates health professionals and supports medical cannabis research ([www.ccic.net](http://www.ccic.net)).

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# About The Arthritis Society

The Arthritis Society has been setting lives in motion for over 65 years. Dedicated to a vision of living well while creating a future without arthritis, The Society is Canada's principal health charity providing education, programs and support to the over 4.6 million Canadians living with arthritis. Since its founding in 1948, The Society has been the largest non-government funder of arthritis research in Canada, investing over \$190 million in projects that have led to breakthroughs in the diagnosis, treatment and care of people with arthritis.



## Become a Volunteer

Help others through meaningful work. By volunteering with The Arthritis Society, you can give back to your community, learn new skills, gain work experience and meet new friends. Visit [arthritis.ca](https://www.arthritis.ca) or call 1.800.321.1433.

## Donate Online

Donations to The Arthritis Society support vital research and services that help improve the lives of people with arthritis. There are many ways to give, visit [arthritis.ca/donate](https://www.arthritis.ca/donate) to make a contribution and learn more.

# How We Can Help

The Arthritis Society offers free education, programs and support to Canadians living with arthritis.

- **Programs and services:** Join us for adult and child educational sessions, such as the Chronic Pain Management Workshop ([arthritis.ca/cpmw](http://arthritis.ca/cpmw)) and various public forums.
- **Online self-management courses:** Try e-learning programs like *You and Your Health-Care Provider: A Guide for Effective Conversations* and *Overcome Fatigue* ([arthritis.ca/education](http://arthritis.ca/education)).
- **Publications:** We publish several information booklets to help people living with arthritis understand more about their condition and treatment options as well as tips on how to self-manage. For a list of arthritis conditions and related resource materials, including a digital copy of this information, visit [arthritis.ca/publications](http://arthritis.ca/publications).

**Learn more and connect with our online community at [arthritis.ca](http://arthritis.ca).**



[arthritis.ca](http://arthritis.ca)



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**WE HAVE ARTHRITIS IT DOESN'T HAVE US**