

About the Arthritis Society

The Arthritis Society is a national health charity, fueled by donors and volunteers, with a vision to live in a world where people are free from the devastating effects that arthritis has on lives. Begun in 1948 with one very clear goal – to alleviate the suffering of people crippled by arthritis – that same volunteer-led passion carries on today in communities across Canada. Through the trust and support of our donors and sponsors, the Arthritis Society is Canada’s largest charitable source of investment in cutting-edge arthritis research, and a leader in proactive advocacy and innovative solutions that will deliver better health outcomes for people affected by arthritis.



Medical Cannabis

A Guide to Access

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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, as many as two thirds of Canadian registered medical cannabis patients do so because of a diagnosis of severe arthritis. [Reference: Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada. Information request (ATI 2013-00282) under the Access to Information Act. 2013].

The Arthritis Society has created this booklet to explain the process to access medical cannabis in Canada. If you are considering this as a treatment option, this booklet contains suggested questions for you to ask your physician and licensed seller(s). Also 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.

As of October 17, 2018, the federal [Cannabis Act](#), Bill C-45, makes it legal for individuals in Canada to obtain cannabis outside of the medical cannabis process. However, the rules are different for recreational versus medical use. This booklet will help explain these differences and help you understand the rights and responsibilities of medical cannabis users. Although cannabis is now legally available without medical authorization, your rights as a patient are only protected as long as you are registered to access cannabis for medical purposes, as laid out in **Part 14** of the [Cannabis Regulations](#). We therefore strongly encourage people who require cannabis for medical purposes to follow the registration process. The Cannabis Regulations replace the former Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations (ACMPR), though patients who were registered under the ACMPR do not need to do anything at this time. Your registration will transition automatically to the Cannabis Act and new regulations, as well as keep its existing expiry date (unless cancelled for other reasons).

For additional information on medical cannabis, including the Arthritis Society's position statement, please visit arthritis.ca/medicalcannabis.

NOTE: Medical Cannabis is not a Health Canada approved treatment. To date, evidence on the relative benefits and risks of medical cannabis for the treatment of arthritis is limited. Medical cannabis should not be used by persons under 25 or those with a history of psychosis. This document is intended for informational and educational purposes only and is not intended as a substitute for the advice of a physician. Patients should always consult their physicians or other relevant health professionals for specific information on personal health matters to ensure that their individual circumstances are considered.

The Process to Access Medical Cannabis

Part 14 of the Government of Canada's [Cannabis Regulations](#) outlines the requirements to access cannabis for medical purposes from a federally licensed seller or to produce your own or designate someone to produce it for you.

Here we provide an overview for you of the steps involved for accessing cannabis for medical purposes; begin by educating yourself on both the process and the treatment. The Arthritis Society encourages people living with arthritis to be informed about treatments and choices that affect their care.

With the legalization of non-medical cannabis use in 2018, most of the process to access medical cannabis from a licensed seller under the former Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations (ACMPR) remains unchanged. Individuals still require a medical document signed by a physician or, in some provinces/territories, a nurse practitioner. Medical cannabis users can also still grow a specified number of plants at home for personal use, provided you have permission in advance from Health Canada and a supporting physician.

Some rules, however, are changing, and it's important to understand them – and how your rights around cannabis are different from those of non-medical users. This booklet will help you understand these differences and your rights and responsibilities as a medical cannabis user.

Why should I register to access cannabis for medical purposes?

While non-medical cannabis use is now legal in Canada, the rules are different for non-medical use versus medical use. If you require medical cannabis as part of your arthritis treatment plan, there are many reasons why it is advantageous to become a registered user. These include:

Ensuring a correct dosage:

Your physician will be able to help monitor and adjust the amount of cannabis and frequency of use to identify optimal levels to help alleviate your arthritis symptoms while minimizing side effects. This also includes providing advice and guidance on proper strains for specific symptoms.



Increased carrying limits:

While individuals can only carry up to 30 grams of dried cannabis (or equivalent) per person in public for non-medical use, authorized patients are also allowed to carry a 30-day supply of your prescription or 150g, whichever is less. Although there are limits to how much cannabis a person can carry in public, any adult Canadian can store as much cannabis as they want at home.



Greater rights with respect to public consumption:

Depending on where you live, the rules for smoking or vaping non-medical cannabis in public vary. Non-medical consumption may be prohibited in some or all of the following areas in your jurisdiction:



- ▼ near hospitals, schools, or childcare facilities;
- ▼ anywhere outside your private residence;
- ▼ inside your private residence in shared buildings such as apartments and condominiums

However, medical cannabis rules are different: your legal rights allow you to smoke or vaporize your medicine in public, as long as you do so in a space that is also designated for public tobacco use. Rules around medical cannabis inside a private residence in a shared building may vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. *Please note, oils, capsules and homemade edibles are allowed anywhere, as long as they are for medical purposes. It's also worth noting that the Arthritis Society does NOT endorse smoking of any product, for any reason, as smoking poses known risks to overall health.

Greater rights in the workplace:

Some employers are concerned about the potential abuse of non-medical cannabis on the job and are amending their substance management policies to restrict its use. However, medical use remains legally protected for all employees, in accordance with federal and provincial policies on using prescription medications in the workplace. There are exceptions for occupations considered "safety sensitive", such as driving or operating machinery, but in general employers have a duty to accommodate their employees' rights to lawfully medicate without discrimination.



Tax incentives:

Patients who purchase their cannabis from a licensed seller through a medical document from an approved authorizer (such as a physician) can claim those purchases as a medical expense. This can be helpful, as medical cannabis costs are not currently covered by public drug plans, nor are they covered by most third-party health insurance plans. It is anticipated that private coverage for certain health conditions will become more available in the coming years, but only if under the care of a physician.



Furthermore, there are a number of registered license sellers who have agreed to absorb the federal excise tax on medical cannabis for medical patients, in turn reducing the cost by about 10% or \$1/g, whichever is higher.

Product access, quality and consistency:

Sellers of non-medical cannabis respond to consumer demand to determine the variety and characteristics of product they produce. The strain you require may therefore be more reliably available through the process to access cannabis for medical purposes than through retail distribution. Medical product from licensed sellers follows extensive government-regulated safety and consistency standards, helping ensure a more consistent quality, composition and symptom response.



IMPORTANT: Registering as a medical patient is essential when you need to medicate outside of your home. Having an approved authorization will give you more protection when it comes to medicating in public or arranging for cannabis use during work hours and will help distinguish your use as medically necessary.



5 Steps of Accessing Medical Cannabis

1. Do your homework
2. Talk to your physician or a medical cannabis clinic
3. Select a licensed seller
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](#) and [Health Canada](#) 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 or a medical cannabis clinic: The Arthritis Society believes that decisions about the use of medical cannabis must be in the hands of people with arthritis and their healthcare provider. While non-medical cannabis use is legal in Canada, access to cannabis for medical purposes still requires a medical document signed by an approved authorizer, such as a physician. In some provinces and territories, nurse practitioners may also authorize medical cannabis in accordance with their regulated scope of practice. To prepare for a conversation with your physician about medical cannabis as a treatment option, you may want to view the Arthritis Society’s online learning module on Healthcare ([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 10](#). Your physician may or may not be able to answer these questions for you, based on their own knowledge, experiences and comfort level with authorizing 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.



Some communities have medical cannabis clinics which can offer you another perspective and a level of expertise in authorizing and monitoring medical cannabis. These clinics’ services may not be covered by your provincial health plan, so inquire up front about any fees.

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?

If you are already using medical cannabis for your arthritis, keep your physician informed of what symptoms you are using it to address, how you take it, how often and in what dosage. A medication diary can be useful to help track strain, dose, benefits and side effects.

- 3 Select a licensed seller:** - Under Part 14 of the Government of Canada's Cannabis Act, [Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes](#), medical cannabis must be obtained directly from a licensed seller or grown in limited quantities at home from plants or seeds obtained from a licensed seller. In order to produce cannabis for your own medical purposes or to designate someone to do this for you, you must first [register with Health Canada](#) and also have a medical document signed by your physician sent to Health Canada. As of October 17, 2018, there are no limits to the quantity of cannabis a person can order at one time from a licensed seller, although a maximum of 150g can be shipped at a time.

The [Health Canada website](#) has a list of licensed sellers of Cannabis for Medical Purposes in Canada. It is important to ask a licensed seller questions before you make a decision about which licensed seller will supply your medical cannabis.



Questions to ask a licensed seller

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

- ▼ Do you have a wait list to register?
- ▼ What paperwork is required from an approved authorizer? 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, pills, 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 support?
- ▼ What training do your support staff have? Are they pharmacists/nurses, etc.?
- ▼ How do I report any adverse effects?
- ▼ If I need to move my medical document to another licensed seller, will you assist me in that process?

4 Complete the paperwork:

Outlined below are key requirements to access cannabis for medical purposes:

1. Obtain a medical document from an approved authorizer (i.e. a physician or nurse practitioner, where permitted). Health Canada designates what information must be included in the medical document and provides a sample on [its website](#). A medical document is essentially an authorization for medical cannabis. Licensed sellers may also supply the medical document on their own template for you. The period of use specified on a medical document cannot exceed one year, though registration can be renewed. As of October 17, 2018, the effective date on your registration document will be the day it is issued, rather than the day the medical document was signed by a healthcare provider.



2. Register with a licensed seller.

While the registration form may look different for different licensed sellers, the same basic information will be collected from you, such as full name, birth date, phone number, home address (and delivery address, if different), 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 (except where permitted by a separate authorized medical document), 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. You cannot seek or obtain cannabis from more than one source at a time on the basis of the same medical document. If you wish to change your licensed seller after registering, you can ask them to transfer your medical document to another licensed seller or ask them to return your medical document. If you prefer to produce your own cannabis for medical purposes or designate someone to do so on your behalf, you will need to register with Health Canada.

3. Submit the paperwork to the licensed seller.

The licensed seller will inform you of the process for submitting your completed paperwork, including your medical document and the licensed seller's required registration form(s). Once you submit your completed paperwork (or your physician submits it on your behalf), the licensed seller will process your order. You will also need to provide payment information. As of October 17, 2018, the 30-day limitation period for buying cannabis from a federally licensed seller has been removed.

After registering to access cannabis for medical purposes

Once you have submitted your paperwork and registered to access cannabis for medical purposes, there are a few important things to keep in mind:

Proof to Carry

When you are carrying your medical cannabis in public, always keep a form of legal proof with you, such as your registration document issued by a federally licensed seller, your Health Canada-issued registration certificate for personal or designated production or your registration certificate issued by Health Canada for possession only (this new option is available to meet the needs of people who choose to access medical cannabis exclusively from an authorized retail outlet or online sales platform). This will ensure you are able to fully access your rights as a medical cannabis user, which extend beyond those of a non-medical cannabis user.

Getting behind the wheel

With the arrival of legalization of recreational cannabis, new [Criminal Code legislation](#) exists on cannabis and impaired driving. Refer to your physician and the legislation for additional guidance. Having authorization for medical cannabis does not necessarily mean it is safe to drive after using it (the same is true for any other prescription or over-the-counter medication that can also cause impairment). Additionally, being a registered user does not exempt you from impaired driving legislation. It's important to know that levels of THC and impairment will vary from individual to individual depending on multiple factors. For more information on prohibited drug concentrations, impaired driving laws and potential penalties, visit the [Department of Justice's website.](#)

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). Additionally, some Health Spending Accounts may allow you to claim medical cannabis. 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 (see the [Government of Canada's website](#) for more info). Some licensed sellers 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 seller. In general, the cost ranges between \$5 and \$12 per gram. For plants grown at home, the price of seeds and plants varies, as can other costs.

In either case, ask your licensed seller for more information. A 10% excise tax has been applied to both non-medical and medical cannabis. While the Arthritis Society and other health care groups in Canada are strongly opposed to taxing medical cannabis, established medical users nevertheless need to be prepared to see a 10% increase in the cost of their supply.



The average patient* can expect to spend more than \$1,875 per year on tax, including both sales and excise taxes (*Health Canada published average dose of 2.3g/day and average market pricing of \$8.50/g). Fortunately, there are some licensed sellers who have agreed to absorb this extra tax on medical users. It's worth noting that CBD oils (under 0.3% THC) are not subject to this excise tax. In addition, the government is examining options for establishing a rebate program to retroactively reimburse Canadians using medical cannabis.

3 If my doctor recommends a licensed seller, do I have to use that licensed seller?

No, the decision of which licensed seller to use is up to you. You may want to ask your doctor why they are recommending a specific seller.

4 How are my privacy and information protected?

Licensed sellers are subject to federal and provincial/territorial 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 cannot be disclosed without your explicit consent. Each licensed seller 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 contacting the licensed seller's privacy officer.

5 What if my physician (or nurse practitioner) does not support my decision to seek medical cannabis as a treatment option?

Ensure you understand their perspective about why he or she does not support your choice. They may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with medical cannabis as a treatment. They 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 another physician (or nurse practitioner, in some jurisdictions) who is open to the idea of pursuing medical cannabis as a treatment or visit a medical cannabis clinic. In this situation, only you can decide the best course of action for you. In all cases, ensure that the health professional evaluating you is licensed, conducts a thorough evaluation including a review of your medical history, and will follow up with you to ensure a satisfactory response.

They may advise that you discontinue medical cannabis if your condition worsens or if you experience side effects.



6 Can I grow my own medical cannabis?

The introduction of the Access to Cannabis for Medical Purposes Regulations in 2016 made growing your own medical cannabis legal under certain conditions. To produce your own cannabis for medical purposes or to designate someone to do this on your behalf, you will need to register with Health Canada. You will be limited in the number of plants you can grow, depending on your medical document and the yield expected from your growing conditions. For more information on producing cannabis for your own medical purposes, including forms to apply, [click here](#).



The need for research

Safety and improved care for people living with arthritis are the Arthritis Society's top priorities. Given that significant gaps remain in information about medical cannabis and its use in treating arthritis symptoms, the Arthritis Society is actively supporting additional research, the goal of which is to provide patients and physicians with greater access to credible and complete evidence 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:
arthritis.ca/medicalcannabis

Health Canada's information on the process to access:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/getting-cannabis-from-licensed-producer/accessing-from-licensed-producer.html>

Health Canada's information for consumers:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/licensed-producers/consumer-information-cannabis.html>

Health Canada's document for Health Care Providers:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/information-medical-practitioners.html>

Health Canada's list of licensed producers:
<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/licensed-producers/authorized-licensed-producers-medical-purposes.html>

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 organization that educates health professionals and supports medical cannabis research (www.ccic.net).