



INFORMATION SHEET

Medicinal cannabis in the workplace

Cannabis

Cannabis is considered a drug with high potential for abuse in most countries. The drug is produced from the cannabis plant and contains over 100 active chemicals (cannabinoids). Many cannabinoids are psychoactive (mind altering) or become psychoactive after they are metabolised in the body. The main psychoactive ingredient in cannabis is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Cannabis affects a person's judgement, motor coordination, reaction times and driving ability.

The use and possession of non-medicinal cannabis is not permitted in Australia except in the Australian Capital Territory.

Medicinal cannabis

Access to medicinal cannabis (by prescription only) was legalised by the Australian Government in 2016. The drug is regulated by the Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA).

Medicinal cannabis is not a first-line therapy for any medical condition (TGA, 2017). Additionally, it is not available on the pharmaceutical benefits scheme (PBS). Most medicinal cannabis products have not been approved or registered by the TGA. This means that unlike regular prescription medications, they have not undergone rigorous TGA checks for safety, quality or efficacy. Over 100 medicinal cannabis products are available in the form of pills, oils and herbal material. Medicinal cannabis is taken orally, by mouth spray or vaporised. However, the TGA does not support smoking of the product.

Medicinal cannabis products are listed under Schedule 4 (Prescription only medicine) and Schedule 8 (Controlled drugs) of the Therapeutic Goods (Poisons Standard–October 2024) Instrument 2024. Medicinal cannabis contains either cannabidiol (CBD), THC or varying proportions of both. CBD-only products are listed under Schedule 4 (Prescription only medicine). Products containing CBD and THC, or only THC are Schedule 8 drugs. These drugs are subject to strict controls, along with drugs of addiction, drugs of dependence and controlled drugs (such as morphine and fentanyl). Importantly, medicinal cannabis should not be taken by pregnant women due to its effects on the unborn foetus (TGA, 2017).

So far, the TGA has only approved and registered two products. Sativex (nabimixols), a synthetic cannabinoid, which is approved for the relief of moderate to severe and resistant spasticity in multiple sclerosis. Epidyolex (CBD) is approved for the control of seizures associated with Lennox-Gastaut syndrome or Dravet syndrome for patients aged 2 years and above.

CBD does not produce a 'high' but causes fatigue and drowsiness.

THC is psychoactive and has intoxicating properties. This means that it produces a 'high' (euphoria). THC also causes psychomotor impairment that affects cognition, short term memory, decision-making and motor skills.

What are the side effects of medicinal cannabis?

The effect of the drug depends on the medical cannabis product, the dose and the route of administration. Effects also vary according to the individual's physiological makeup and experience with cannabinoid use.

Known side effects of the drug include feeling tired, sleepy, dizzy, confused, nauseous, vomiting, increased or decreased appetite, dry mouth and diarrhoea.

Side effects from products high in THC products can include feeling 'high', dissatisfied, deeply sad, confused, anxious, paranoid, and hallucinations.

Medicinal cannabis has triggered acute psychosis, requiring urgent treatment in a hospital or mental health facility. Medicinal cannabis should not be prescribed for vulnerable individuals, especially those with previous serious psychiatric illness or substance abuse or family history of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression (NPS MedicineWise).

What are the potential drug interactions with medicinal cannabis?

CBD is a strong inhibitor of enzymes that break down alcohol and many commonly prescribed medications. These include opioids, sedatives, anticoagulants, antipsychotics, antidepressants, antiepileptics, cardiovascular agents and cancer therapies. Undesired effects include enhanced intoxication if used with alcohol, increased sedation if taken with sedative medication, and increased risk of bleeding with use of blood thinners.

THC similarly interacts with commonly prescribed medications.

What are the concerns over the use of medicinal cannabis in the workplace?

Medicinal cannabis may affect a person's capacity to safely drive, operate machinery and perform complex tasks. As noted above, the effect and duration of the drug's action can vary widely.

Prescribers should consider work health and safety issues before prescribing medicinal cannabis. There are safety concerns around driving, operating machinery and safety critical work including transport (air, road, rail), construction, mining, exploration and drilling, use of explosives, operating mobile plant equipment and other similar work.

Medicinal cannabis affects concentration and attention. Ingested medicinal cannabis has an effect within 30-60 minutes that may persist for 8-24 hours. Administration via mouth spray or vaporising (herbal material) produces a faster effect with a shorter duration.

CBD has a lower risk than THC for driving but its sedative effect cannot be ignored. THC can impair the ability to drive safely. Studies measuring lane departure show that it can have a similar effect to alcohol.

Combining medicinal cannabis with alcohol, even in small amounts, can be dangerous resulting in greater impairment than on its own.

In general, the person should not drive for at least 8 hours after taking a THC dose. Driving and testing positive for THC is an offence in most jurisdictions. Similarly, workers in safety critical work can test positive, which can have implications on their work.

What are my responsibilities as a worker who is taking medicinal cannabis?

Medicinal cannabis can affect your ability to work safely just like any other prescribed medication that affects alertness, memory, decision-making, mood and motor coordination. If you are in a role where impairment may present a risk, you have a responsibility to notify your employer that you are taking a prescribed medicinal cannabis product. This is so that they can conduct a risk assessment. Your employer also has a duty of care to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, your health and safety in the workplace.

What are my work health and safety responsibilities as a PCBU?

A person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU) has a primary duty of care to ensure the health and safety of workers while at work. This includes, so far as is reasonably practicable, the provision and maintenance of a work environment without risks to health and safety, and the provision and maintenance of safe systems of work.

The risks from workers taking medicinal cannabis can be managed along the same lines as for prescription medication that can cause impairment at work. The PCBU should consider the risks to the safety of the worker and that of other workers and people in the workplace.

Appropriate actions include:

- developing policy and procedures on managing the use of medicinal cannabis in the workplace
- consulting with workers, and health and safety representatives and committees
- identifying roles and tasks where impairment may present a risk to work health and safety, including safety critical work
- providing a process for workers to confidentially notify management
- providing an assessment process including medical advice on fitness for work
- conducting a risk assessment and modification of work tasks where required
- running an education and awareness program for workers, supervisors and management.

References and further information

WorkSafe

- [Alcohol and drugs](#)

WA Department of Health

- [Cannabis-based products](#)
- [Cannabis](#)

Parliament of Western Australia

- [Select Committee into Medicinal cannabis and industrial hemp in Western Australia](#)

Department of Health and Aged Care

- [Guidance for the use of medicinal cannabis in Australia: Patient information](#)

Fair Work Commission

- [Unfair dismissal](#)

Fair Work Ombudsman

- [Ending employment: What is unfair dismissal?](#)

International Council on Alcohol, Drugs & Traffic Safety

- [Fact Sheet on Cannabis and Driving](#)

NPS MedicineWise

- [Medicinal cannabis, explained](#)

For further information about work health and safety, visit the [WorkSafe website](#).

Notes:

By January 2024, TGA data revealed that medicinal cannabis prescriptions had escalated rapidly with 18,000 patients in 2019 to over a million who had been prescribed some 500 unregistered products. Most prescriptions were for THC-based products. The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Authority (AHPRA) was concerned enough to call a meeting of stakeholders in February 2024 (AHPRA, 20/02/2024). The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists reported inappropriate prescribing to people with previous serious psychiatric conditions including psychosis and drug abuse. They also reported that many people had their first episodes of psychosis after taking medicinal cannabis.