



CIBG  
*Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport*

# Medicinal Cannabis

Information brochure for patients



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# Introduction

This brochure contains information about various types of medicinal cannabis, their uses and their potential effects. It is intended for patients and people who are interested in learning more about medicinal cannabis and its use.

## What is medicinal cannabis?

Cannabis consists of the dried flowers of the female hemp plant (*Cannabis sativa* L) and is often called marijuana or weed. Cannabis contains a number of different active ingredients. Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is usually the main active ingredient, but other components - such as cannabidiol (CBD) - also have an effect. The particular composition determines the effects and side effects of the cannabis. Cannabis dispensed by a pharmacy, on a doctor's prescription, has to meet stringent quality requirements. This cannabis is intended for therapeutic purposes, which is why we call it medicinal cannabis.

### What can be said about the quality?

Medicinal cannabis from a pharmacy must meet stringent quality requirements. Its composition, for example, must always be the same, and no pesticides, heavy metals, moulds or bacteria may be found in medicinal cannabis. Research has shown that cannabis purchased from a coffee shop does not always meet these quality requirements.

A grower who has been appointed by the Office of Medicinal Cannabis (OMC) cultivates the cannabis under strict, controlled circumstances, and an independent laboratory tests each new crop to ensure that all the quality requirements are met.

## What types of medicinal cannabis are available?

The OMC supplies various types of cannabis, which are available in pharmacies. They each have a unique composition and therefore differ in effect. The five available types are:

Type	THC content	CBD content
Bedrocan®	approx. 22%	less than 1%
Bedica®	approx. 14%	less than 1%
Bedrobinol®	approx. 13,5%	less than 1%
Bediol®	approx. 6,3%	approx. 8%
Bedrolite®	less than 1%	approx. 7,5%

Bedrocan® and Bedrobinol® are available as dried flower heads (flos). Bediol®, Bedica® and Bedrolite® are sold as finely-ground flower heads (granules), making them easier to use (especially for patients with poor hand function). When used in a vaporiser or to make tea, it does not matter whether dried flower heads or granules are used.



### **CBD oil**

CBD oil, with or without THC, is available on prescription as a pharmaceutical compound from several pharmacies in the Netherlands. An overview of these pharmacies can be found on our website ([www.cannabisbureau.nl](http://www.cannabisbureau.nl)). Various CBD products, including CBD oil, are also available online, in chemists and health stores. These are sometimes offered as dietary supplements or medical aids.

Only cannabis oil purchased from a pharmacy is standardised. Currently, there is no officially authorised product containing CBD available in the Netherlands.

### **What conditions might benefit?**

In recent years, research using medicinal cannabis has been conducted for a variety of disorders with mixed results; sometimes there is evidence that its use is effective, but in other instances there is none. Cannabis may be effective for treating:

- Pain, muscle cramps and muscle spasms caused by MS or spinal cord injury;
- Nausea, decreased appetite, weight loss and weakness related to cancer and AIDS;
- Nausea and vomiting caused by medication or radiation therapy for cancer, hepatitis C or HIV infection and AIDS;
- Chronic pain (particularly nerve pain, for example caused by nerve damage, phantom pain, facial pain, or pain that persists after a cured shingles infection);
- Tourette's syndrome;
- Glaucoma, if standard treatment is not effective enough;
- Various forms of epilepsy (also in children).

We are also learning from the experiences of doctors and patients who use cannabis for the treatment of other conditions. Examples include Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis, migraine and cluster headaches, dystonia (abnormal muscle contractions), rheumatic diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia, ADHD, post-traumatic stress disorder, restlessness caused by Alzheimer's disease, itching and brain trauma.

Medicinal cannabis currently does not play a role in curing these diseases, but it can reduce the symptoms they cause. Medicinal cannabis can also help reduce the dosage and side effects of other medicines. The doctor can determine the conditions and situations for which medicinal cannabis may be a good choice. Medicinal cannabis is mostly prescribed when standard treatments and medicines are not effective enough or have too many side effects.

On the website [www.cannabis-med.org](http://www.cannabis-med.org) of the International Association for Cannabinoid Medicine (IACM) you can find a list of scientific studies involving cannabis and details of its positive effect on various conditions.



# Treatment with medicinal cannabis

To use medicinal cannabis you will need a physician's prescription. All doctors in the Netherlands are authorised to prescribe medicinal cannabis.

In consultation with the patient, the doctor will determine:

- Which type of cannabis is most suitable to begin with.
- The way in which the medicinal cannabis should be used.
- How much medicinal cannabis should be used at a time and per day.

The OMC can advise doctors, pharmacists and patients on this.

## Which type of medicinal cannabis is most suitable?

The symptoms determine which type of cannabis is most suitable.

Cannabis that has higher levels of THC (Bedrocan<sup>®</sup>, Bedica<sup>®</sup> and Bedrobinol<sup>®</sup>) is most effective in dealing with conditions such as Tourette's syndrome and glaucoma, and for complaints such as weight loss, nausea and vomiting.

THC is also an important ingredient for pain reduction. In chronic nerve pain, Bediol<sup>®</sup> (a combination of THC and CBD) treatment is often the first step. If this does not provide enough pain relief then a different type with a higher THC content is used. In addition to the known effects of cannabis, Bedica<sup>®</sup> has an extra relaxing effect on body and mind. This can be a good choice for complaints such as restlessness, insomnia or muscle spasms.

For treating pain combined with muscle spasms, as can occur in multiple sclerosis (MS), cannabis combining THC and CBD (such as Bediol<sup>®</sup>) may work better than cannabis that only contains THC. CBD not only reduces pain, but also has anti-inflammatory effects and reduces the psychological side effects of THC.

Bedrolite<sup>®</sup> contains less than 1% THC, and therefore has no effect on the mind or behaviour. CBD may be effective in the treatment of various forms of epilepsy.

## How can you use medicinal cannabis?

Cannabis only works if it is heated before use. Medicinal cannabis can be used in a number of different ways, for example as tea or by inhaling it after vaporisation (using a vaporiser or nebuliser). Inhalation works faster and more strongly than tea. The correct dosage is also easier to determine.

### **Tea**

When using medicinal cannabis as tea, it takes 30 to 90 minutes before it begins to work. The maximum effect is usually achieved after 2 to 3 hours and it takes 4 to 8 hours before the effects wear off. If you drink the tea and eat fatty foods at the same time, the cannabis works faster and better.

### **Inhalation**

Inhalation works faster than tea and the effects wear off more quickly. The body absorbs the active ingredient quickly and the maximum effect is achieved within a few minutes. This makes it easy to adjust the dose. If the effect is insufficient, you can inhale more. If you feel side effects, it is a good idea to wait until they dissipate on their own. The effect of the medicinal cannabis wears off after 3 to 4 hours.

### **Smoking**

Smoking cannabis regularly is harmful to health. It can damage the lungs and cause inflammation of throat, nose and lungs. We, therefore, do not recommend that you smoke medicinal cannabis.

### **Oil**

Apply drops of oil under the tongue. For more information about its efficacy, please consult the pharmacist providing the cannabis oil.

## Is medicinal cannabis covered by my insurance?

Health insurance companies do not reimburse the costs of medicinal cannabis. If necessary, ask your health insurance company about their reimbursement policies regarding medicinal cannabis.

# Instructions for use and dosage

## Tea

If you want to make tea with medicinal cannabis, please do the following:

- Bring half a litre of water to the boil.
- Add half a gram (about 2 teaspoons or 1 measuring spoon) of medicinal cannabis.
- Turn down the heat, cover the pan with a lid and let the tea simmer gently for 15 minutes.
- Remove the pan from the heat and strain the tea.
- Store the tea in a thermos if you wish to drink more on the same day.

### **Making tea for several days:**

Use 1 gram (about 4 teaspoons or 2 measuring spoons) of medicinal cannabis per 1 litre of water. After preparation - as described above - add a sachet or teaspoon of powdered coffee creamer to the warm tea (this prevents the active ingredients from sticking to the teapot or mug). Let the tea cool and keep it in the refrigerator. After cooling, the tea may be stored in the refrigerator for a number of days. Tea from the refrigerator can be warmed up again. You can also add sugar, syrup or honey to improve the taste.

### **Dosage:**

You usually begin by drinking 1 cup (0.2 litres) of tea in the evening. If the effect is insufficient after 1 or 2 weeks, you may - in consultation with your doctor - add a second cup (0.2 litres) of tea in the morning. If the tea does not work effectively, you can try inhaling the medicinal cannabis with a vaporiser or nebuliser.

## Inhalation

Use a reliable vaporiser or nebuliser to inhale the medicinal cannabis. Nebulisers - with instructions for use - are available from pharmacies, among other places.

**Dosage:**

- For initial use, place about 200 milligrams (1 teaspoon or half a measuring spoon) of medicinal cannabis in the vaporiser.
- Heat the cannabis and inhale once.
- Wait several minutes before inhaling again.
- Repeat this a number of times, until the desired effect has been achieved or until (mental) side effects occur. When first starting the treatment, do this once or twice daily.
- If you want to use more, increase the dose gradually. Do not repeat inhalations too quickly. Consult your doctor regularly. The correct cannabis dosage can vary widely from person to person.

**Oil**

For instructions for use, contact the pharmacy where you obtained the oil.



# Risks and side-effects

## For whom could the use of cannabis be risky?

Sometimes the use of cannabis is not recommended, or requires extra care.

This is the case for:

- People with a family history of psychosis (such as schizophrenia) or other psychological conditions. In rare cases, cannabis can cause a psychotic episode in this group of people. Support from a medical specialist is therefore important.
- People with cardiovascular diseases. Cannabis can have effects on blood pressure and heart rate. Supervision from a medical specialist is also important for these patients.
- Young people up to the age of 23 years. This group is particularly sensitive to the ingredients in cannabis so its use is, therefore, not recommended. These young people, in principle, should not use medicinal cannabis.

## What are the side effects?

Patients generally tolerate medicinal cannabis well. Low dosages are usually sufficient, so side effects are relatively uncommon. Side effects occur mainly at higher doses or when used with a substance that increases the side effects (such as alcohol).

The known side effects of medicinal cannabis include insomnia and heart palpitations. Sometimes, cannabis can increase feelings of anxiety and depression. Other effects are relaxation, dry mouth, fits of laughter, increased appetite, more vivid experience of, for example, colours and music, drowsiness and a distorted sense of time and space. It can also impair responsiveness, particularly during the first hours of use. At higher dosages, you may feel 'high'. This is an extreme sensation of joy that gradually changes into a satisfied feeling of calmness and tranquillity. All of these effects usually fade within a few hours.

### Are you allowed to drive?

The use of cannabis can lower the concentration and reduce reaction time. In the Netherlands, there is a legal limit for cannabis of 3.0 micrograms of THC/litre of blood for road users. THC remains in the body for a long time, so this limit can be exceeded very easily. Though the rules differ per country.

### Can you use cannabis during pregnancy and while breastfeeding?

Regular or long-term use of cannabis during pregnancy can affect the development of the unborn child. Certain ingredients of cannabis - such as THC - also enter breastmilk. The use of medicinal cannabis during pregnancy and while breastfeeding is, therefore, not recommended. For more information, please contact your doctor or pharmacist.

### Is there a risk of dependency or addiction?

Dependency generally does not occur when cannabis is used in lower dosages, as is the case in medical use. If you have suffered from cannabis dependency in the past, you should be extra careful.

Long-term use of high dosages of cannabis can create dependency. Stopping the treatment can lead to the development of withdrawal symptoms such as restlessness, irritability, insomnia and nausea.

# Cannabis online and on social media

The use of cannabis for the treatment of illnesses and medical complaints has become popular. More and more people are buying CBD oil from chemist shops and sales via other channels are also increasing.

There are groups on Facebook and Instagram who buy and sell all kinds of cannabis products, both the dried cannabis flowers and in the form of oil.

The source of these products is unknown and their production is not regulated. It is unclear, therefore, what the quality of these products is, what exactly is in them and in what quantity, and whether the production process is sufficiently clean.

The popularity of cannabis to treat illnesses and medical complaints also leads to a lot of questions being raised online. Patients ask a lot of questions in discussion forums, YouTube videos and on some websites. The questions are answered by people claiming to be experts, but who usually have no medical or pharmaceutical background. The opinions are generally not based on scientific research, and cannot simply be accepted as fact. These websites often have a commercial purpose, namely to sell as much cannabis as possible. If you have questions about cannabis, ask your doctor or pharmacist, or contact the Office of Medicinal Cannabis.

According to stories online, cannabis is a panacea: it appears to be good for every conceivable complaint and illness. The belief that cannabis can cure all manner of cancers is particularly widespread. Unfortunately, the evidence that cancer can be cured by cannabis has not yet been found, despite the fact that there is ongoing scientific research examining this question all over the world. If you still want to try using cannabis, it is important to discuss this with your doctor. Remember that medicinal cannabis never replaces the standard treatments for cancer.

# Travelling with medicinal cannabis

Medicinal cannabis is covered by the Opium Act. Travelling abroad with a medicine that falls under the Opium Act requires an official declaration.

Information about the required declaration and the approval process can be found on the CAK website, [www.hetcak.nl](http://www.hetcak.nl)

## Want to know more?

If you have any further questions, please contact your doctor and/or pharmacist. Alternatively, you - or your doctor or pharmacist - can contact the Office of Medicinal Cannabis of the CIBG, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, The Hague. The OMC is the National Cannabis Bureau. This bureau is responsible for the production of cannabis for medical and scientific purposes. On the website of the OMC ([www.cannabisbureau.nl](http://www.cannabisbureau.nl)) you will find additional information about the medical use of cannabis.

### Relevant websites

- Office of Medicinal Cannabis (OMC): [www.cannabisbureau.nl](http://www.cannabisbureau.nl)
- CIBG, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport: [www.cibg.nl](http://www.cibg.nl)
- Travelling abroad with medicinal cannabis: [www.hetcak.nl](http://www.hetcak.nl)
- Scientific articles about medicinal cannabis: [www.cannabis-med.org](http://www.cannabis-med.org)



This brochure is a publication of the Institute for Responsible Medication Use and the Office of Medicinal Cannabis (OMC) of the CIBG, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport.

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