



Medicinal cannabis for people living with
pain

Prepared for: Pain Australia

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painaustralia™
working to prevent and manage pain

Federal laws legalising the cultivation and manufacture of medicinal cannabis products in Australia were passed in February 2016. Since then there have been several major developments to do with regulations, drug re-scheduling and licenses. But many people are still confused about what this all means for their access to medicinal cannabis.

There are two things that should be stressed initially:

First, there are currently (as of 14 November 2016) no approved cannabis medicines for the treatment of pain in Australia. There is, in fact, only one approved cannabis medicine in Australia which is for treating muscle spasticity in people living with MS.

Second, the complex nature of pain – and the complex nature of the chemicals in the cannabis plant – means that there has been limited research on cannabis and pain. And the evidence we do have is mixed.

Although the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has recently changed cannabis from being a ‘prohibited substance’ (which can’t be used to make medicines) to a ‘controlled drug’ (which can), new cannabis medicines are still to be researched, tested in clinical trials, and approved by the TGA before they can be prescribed by doctors.

Companies and research groups can now apply for licenses to cultivate, research and manufacture cannabis medicines, but it will be several months before they can navigate the regulations and get further approvals from Federal and State/Territory Governments. They will then need to develop, test and get these medicines approved by the TGA before they can be prescribed.

Many people are currently researching the potential of cannabis to help people living with pain. And some of these cannabis companies will also be aiming to develop cannabis medicines for these people. But there is not guarantee that this will result in cannabis medicines for people living with pain being available from doctors.

If these medicines are successfully developed and approved, it will be up to the Health Departments of the individual States/Territories to specify which doctors can prescribe certain products, and which conditions and symptoms cannabis medicines can be prescribed for. For example, in Victoria, the first group of patients who will get access to medicinal cannabis products will be children with epilepsy. These decisions will mostly be informed by specialist advisory panels, although each State/Territory will have a slightly different system.

In the meantime, there are several research studies and clinical trials currently ongoing in Australia which are using cannabis medicines not yet approved for general sale, either made by the NSW and Victorian State Governments, or imported from overseas.

For people living with pain who want to access cannabis medicines that have yet to be approved by the TGA, there are currently three possible routes:

- participating in clinical trials
- using the TGA’s Special Access Scheme
- using the TGA’s Authorised Prescriber Scheme

Details about these routes are available on the TGA's website:
<https://www.tga.gov.au/accessing-unapproved-products>

People who want more information or need assistance accessing medicinal cannabis can also contact the medicinal cannabis and patient advocacy group United in Compassion: <http://www.unitedincompassion.com.au/>

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