

# HIV & Medicinal Cannabis

## General information about access and use

### The Facts

- People living with HIV have used cannabis for a range of medicinal purposes since the beginning of the HIV epidemic.
- Medicinal cannabis is legal in Australia, highly regulated and only available under prescription as most are unapproved medicines.
- Any Australian registered General Practitioner or Specialist can prescribe medicinal cannabis through a variety of regulated pathways.
- Most medicinal cannabis prescriptions in Australia are authorised for chronic pain, chronic insomnia or various chronic mental health diagnoses (anxiety, depression, ADHD, autism).
- Medicinal cannabis can only be considered if a first line therapy has either not worked or caused side effects. Special approval from NSW Health is required if the individual is on the Opiate Treatment Program (OTP) or known to use drugs.
- Given the wide variability in the individual responses to cannabis, it is difficult to demonstrate the personal benefit consistently across different groups of people.
- Medicinal cannabis is contraindicated if you have unstable cardiovascular, renal or liver disease or have a history of schizophrenia.
- The most critical guideline prescribers of medicinal cannabis must follow is to always start on a low dose and increase slowly, titrating the dose to the lowest effective dose for each individual person.

### Uses of Cannabis

- Historically, people living with HIV have used cannabis as an appetite stimulant. Some people living with HIV have used cannabis to mitigate neuropathic (nerve) pain (such as peripheral neuropathy).
- Other uses include aiding with sleep, reduce anxiety and/or effects of trauma, manage symptoms of HIV associated neurocognitive disorder (HAND), to reduce or complement the use of opiate-based pain relief.
- There is some evidence of an anti-inflammatory effect.
- There are potential drug interactions with some older antidepressants, and HIV medications such as ritonavir and rifabutin.
- The known side-effects from medicinal cannabis treatment include fatigue and sedation, vertigo, nausea and vomiting, fever, decreased or increased appetite, dry mouth, and diarrhoea.



**“Many people use cannabis medicinally because they find a personal benefit.**

**However, there is a lack of quality studies that demonstrate the personal benefit is consistent across different groups of people.”**



## Accessing medicinal cannabis

- In NSW any Authorised Prescriber can prescribe a cannabis medicine if they believe it is an appropriate treatment option for their patient and they have obtained the relevant authority.
- In Australia, companies that grow, manufacture, or import medicinal cannabis must follow strict standards created by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), designed to ensure patients receive safe and effective, pharmaceutical-grade products.
- Most medicinal cannabis products are not subsidised by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS). The average monthly cost can vary between \$50 and \$1,000, depending on the product and the amount used.
- It is illegal to drive after using medicinal cannabis containing tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), as it can impair your driving ability for several hours. THC consumption can affect cognitive function and overall driving performance.
- The detectability of THC in urine varies based on the product, dosage, duration of use, and delivery method, ranging from a few days to several weeks. It's best to consult with your prescribing doctor about cannabis use and driving, as well as review the local laws in your state or territory.
- In NSW it is illegal to grow, sell or supply cannabis even if you have a prescription.

For more information phone 02 8357 8386 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or visit [www.positivelife.org.au](http://www.positivelife.org.au)

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The voice of all people living with HIV

Positive Life NSW

## Types of Cannabis

Cannabis plants are broadly categorised into two main species: Sativa and Indica, with Balanced Hybrids combining characteristics of both.

### Sativa

- Appearance: Sativa plants tend to have longer, thinner leaves.
- Effects: Traditionally known to produce a “head high,” sativa strains are more likely to improve alertness and motivation. They are typically used during the daytime.

### Indica

- Appearance: Indica plants tend to have shorter, broader leaves.
- Effects: Indica strains are traditionally recognised for providing a “body high” that promotes relaxation and enhances sleep. They are commonly used in the evenings and before bedtime.

### Balanced Hybrids

- Balanced hybrids are cannabis plants developed by crossbreeding Sativa and Indica strains. They provide a combination of uplifting and relaxing effects, making them a versatile choice for both daytime and nighttime use.

## Products

- Medicinal cannabis is available in a variety of forms, including oils, pastilles, gummies, wafers, soft chews, capsules, tablets, mouth sprays, lozenges, creams, extracts, and concentrates.

## Resources

**The Federal TGA ‘Medicinal cannabis hub’ offers a variety of information about medicinal cannabis access pathways**

- <https://www.tga.gov.au/products/unapproved-therapeutic-goods/medicinal-cannabis-hub>

**The NSW Government Centre for Medicinal Cannabis Research and Innovation offers information for patients and medical practitioners**

- <https://www.medicinalcannabis.nsw.gov.au/patients>

**NSW Health offers information about the requirements for prescribing, supplying and dispensing cannabis medicines**

- <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/pharmaceutical/cannabismedicines/>