

Tip Sheet:

Medical Marijuana Use During Cancer Treatment

What is marijuana?

Marijuana is a drug that can affect one's mood, thinking, appetite, sleep, and coordination. It comes from the hemp plant *Cannabis sativa* and is also known as cannabis, pot, grass, and weed. Marijuana has hundreds of active ingredients. There are many ways to use marijuana, such as inhaling it as smoke or vapor, mixing it in food, rubbing it on, or spraying it under the tongue. Using marijuana can cause serious side effects and should be considered carefully.

What is medical marijuana?

Medical marijuana refers to treating a symptom or illness with the whole marijuana plant or its extracts.

The marijuana plant contains chemicals called *cannabinoids* that may help relieve symptoms in people with cancer, AIDS, multiple sclerosis, and other medical conditions. These chemicals include *delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)*, which causes a "high," and *cannabidiol*, which does not affect the mind in the same way.

Thirty-one U.S. states – including Massachusetts – have legalized marijuana for certain medical conditions like cancer. But these laws conflict with federal law, under which it is illegal to possess, prescribe, or sell marijuana. Research on marijuana's benefit to patients is not far along, but some of the strongest evidence for medical marijuana (cannabis) appears to be in treating chronic pain in adults.

What is known about medical marijuana and cancer?

There is some very early evidence to support that medical marijuana may be useful in managing certain symptoms and side effects from cancer and its treatment, such as pain, nausea and vomiting, weight loss, sleep problems, and anxiety. However, there are more established ways to manage your symptoms and side effects. They include prescription drugs made with THC that have long been used in cancer.

How do people get medical marijuana?

In Massachusetts, residents age 18 years and older may buy medical marijuana if they have a signed statement (certification) from a physician and a registration card from the state. Dana-Farber does not give out medical marijuana. However, a few of its doctors provide certifications for their patients who might benefit.

What are the risks of using medical marijuana?

- Feeling "high"
- Dizziness
- Decreased concentration
- Confusion
- Muscle weakness, poor coordination
- Dry mouth and throat irritation
- Breathing problems
- Headache and nausea
- Mood changes, including depression and anxiety
- Hallucinations, paranoia

Other concerns:

- Marijuana can be addictive.
- It can impair your driving.
- Marijuana has hundreds of active ingredients, and some marijuana strains have high levels of the mind-altering THC.

- Smoking releases toxins that can damage lungs and other organs.
- Smoking a plant-based substance like marijuana carries a risk of fungal infection, which can be dangerous for patients with weakened immune systems.

Can marijuana interfere with my cancer treatment?

Maybe. Marijuana can interact with therapies you may be taking for your treatment. For example, it may affect the way the body metabolizes chemotherapy. Also, marijuana use can lead to cognitive changes (confusion, high, etc.) that may hurt your ability to keep appointments or follow your treatment.

Other ways to relieve symptoms

Medications

There are many approved treatments to help with pain, nausea and vomiting, appetite loss, or mood. These include the THC-based prescription medication dronabinol, which is taken in pill form. Drugs containing THC may have marijuana-type side effects, but they are not considered medical marijuana because they are pharmaceutical-grade (pure).

Counseling

Dana-Farber clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists work with our medical providers to address the emotional and mental health needs of patients and, in some cases, family members. We provide support around anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, uncertainty, relationships, personal safety, and more. We can also talk with you about resources in the community to support you and your family. For more information, call **617-632-3301**.

Integrative therapies

The Leonard P. Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies and Healthy Living offers individual sessions in acupuncture, massage, reflexology, and Reiki, and free group programs in exercise/movement, meditation, and music and art therapy. Visit www.dana-farber.org/zakim, email zakim_center@dfci.harvard.edu, or call **617-632-3322**.

Tell your care team

Medical marijuana should be considered carefully as part of your overall cancer treatment. We encourage you to tell your Dana-Farber care team if you plan to use medical marijuana. If you think you have a marijuana addiction problem, please talk with your doctor and/or see our patient information materials on “Drug Misuse During Cancer Treatment.”

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.