Medical Cannabis (Marijuana) Use During Cancer

Here we share information on the role of caregivers and some of the concerns caregivers may experience while helping patients through their cancer treatment.

What is cannabis?
Cannabis, also known as marijuana, is a plant that has been used for thousands of years for medical and non-medical purposes. The cannabis plant contains chemical compounds, some called cannabinoids, that may help relieve symptoms of illnesses. Well-known cannabinoids are delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which causes a “high” feeling, and cannabidiol (CBD), which does not.

There are many ways to use cannabis: inhaling it as smoke or vapor, mixing it in food, rubbing it on skin, spraying it under the tongue, or inserting it in the rectum (bottom). Some cannabis products can cause unwanted effects and should be carefully considered. Speak with your care team if you have questions about using cannabis during cancer treatment.

What is medical cannabis?
Medical cannabis, also called medical marijuana, is a general term to describe using cannabis for healing purposes — for example, to manage pain, nausea, anxiety, seizures, or insomnia. It usually refers to taking cannabis products as allowed under state law and with approval from a health care professional.

Possessing cannabis with over 0.3% THC by weight is illegal under federal law. At the same time, many U.S. states and territories, including Massachusetts and New Hampshire, have legalized medical cannabis for cancer and other conditions, with laws varying from state to state. Some states, also including Massachusetts, allow adult use of cannabis, also called nonmedical (“recreational”) use. Hemp, a type of cannabis plant with low THC levels, is legal under federal law, and CBD oil products made from hemp are widely available. Some patients choose cannabis products with a high THC content, causing a “high” feeling, while others prefer products that do not have this effect.

More research is needed on the benefits of medical cannabis for cancer patients. In general, some of the strongest evidence in adults appears to be in helping to treat chronic pain.

What is known about medical cannabis and cancer?
Cannabis has been studied for relieving symptoms and side effects caused by cancer or its treatment. For patients with cancer, it appears to be the most helpful in managing nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy. Medical cannabis has also been found to reduce pain, anxiety, and sleep loss. However, there are more established ways to help patients with these issues, including prescription drugs with THC.

Can cannabis interfere with my cancer treatment?
Maybe. Cannabis is not an approved treatment for cancer itself. Depending on your situation, cannabis may interact with cancer therapies you are taking. For example, it may affect the way your body processes chemotherapy. Patients at higher risk of infections should be especially cautious when using inhaled cannabis, as this may be a source of infection in the lungs. Cannabis may also cloud your thinking, which could impact your ability to keep appointments or follow your treatment.
Talk with your care team
As with other supplements and medications, talk with your Dana-Farber care team if you are using or plan to use cannabis. It should be considered carefully. More information can be found in our patient information materials on “Drug Misuse During Cancer Treatment.” If you think you are using cannabis in harmful ways or are having trouble stopping, please talk with your care team.

How do people get medical cannabis?
In Massachusetts, residents age 18 years and older may legally buy cannabis from a dispensary or grow a limited amount of the cannabis plant. Dispensaries in Massachusetts sell cannabis either for medical or non-medical use, or both. Dispensaries in New Hampshire sell cannabis for medical use. Adults might also buy cannabis from unauthorized sellers. To access medical cannabis, adults who have a debilitating or disabling medical condition must obtain a signed statement from a certifying physician and a registration card from the state. Some of your Dana-Farber doctors may be able to pursue state medical cannabis certification for you. However, Dana-Farber does not itself dispense medical cannabis. If you use medical cannabis, you should obtain it from a medical cannabis dispensary.

What are possible side effects of using medical cannabis?

- A “high” feeling (common with THC)
- Cough or trouble breathing
- Dizziness
- Drowsiness, fatigue, tiredness
- Dry mouth and throat irritation
- Fast heart rate
- Headache and nausea
- Memory problems
- Mood changes, including anxiety
- Muscle weakness, poor coordination
- Paranoia and hallucinations
- Poor concentration

Other concerns or risks:

- You can become dependent on cannabis.
- It can impair your driving.
- Some cannabis strains have very high levels of the mind- and mood-altering THC.
- Smoking a plant-based substance like cannabis carries a risk of fungal infection, which can be dangerous for patients with weakened immune systems.
Other ways to relieve cancer-related symptoms:

Medications
There are many approved treatments to help with pain, nausea and vomiting, appetite loss, or mood changes. These include prescription drugs made with THC, such as dronabinol, which have been shown to help relieve nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy. Medications with THC may have cannabis-type side effects, but they are not considered “medical cannabis” because they are pharmaceutical-grade (pure).

Mental health care
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. Mental health care may involve talk therapy, medication (for patients), or both. Mental health providers offer support around anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, uncertainty, relationships, personal safety, and more. They can also talk with you about resources in the community to support you and your family. For more information, call the Division of Social Work at 617-632-3301 or visit danafarber.org/socialwork.

Palliative Care
Dana-Farber Palliative Care providers help manage pain and discomfort, aiding quality of life. Palliative care providers work as a part of your cancer care team to provide expert treatment of pain and other symptoms. Talk with your doctor if you would like additional support in managing your cancer-related symptoms.

Integrative therapies
The Leonard P. Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies and Healthy Living offers acupuncture and massage services and free group programs in exercise/movement, meditation, and music and art therapy. Visit www.dana-farber.org/zakim for program information; email zakim_center@dfci.harvard.edu or call 617-632-3322 to make an appointment for services.