

## Accessing Medicinal Cannabis in Australia

*Everything You Wanted to Know About Medicinal Marijuana (but were too afraid to ask!)*

Medicinal Cannabis has gained significant attention as a potential treatment for various health conditions. However, understanding how to access it legally and safely in Australia is essential. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) plays a key role in overseeing the legal use of Medicinal Cannabis, ensuring patients can obtain it under appropriate circumstances. At Rise Dispensary, we are committed to helping our patients navigate the laws and regulations surrounding this innovative medicine.

### What is Medicinal Cannabis?

Medicinal Cannabis refers to a variety of cannabis-based preparations intended for therapeutic purposes. These can range from pharmaceutical-grade cannabis extracts, such as oils and tinctures, to untreated forms like raw or dried cannabis flowers.

### The Role of the TGA in Accessing Medicinal Cannabis

The TGA has established quality standards that companies involved in the importation, manufacture, and supply of Medicinal Cannabis must adhere to. While these standards aim to ensure that Medicinal Cannabis products meet specific criteria, the TGA does not guarantee the safety or effectiveness of Medicinal Cannabis.

That is why the TGA currently regulates legal access to Medicinal Cannabis under very strict guidelines. Individuals cannot apply directly to the TGA for these products. Instead, access is facilitated by an Australian registered health practitioner who assesses whether Medicinal Cannabis may be suitable for a patient. Approval or authorisation is granted by the TGA on a case-by-case basis, depending on the patient's medical needs and circumstances.

### How to Access Medicinal Cannabis

The TGA administers several access pathways for Medicinal Cannabis under the Special Access Scheme (SAS). This scheme allows healthcare professionals to apply for access to unapproved therapeutic goods when other approved treatments are unavailable or unsuitable. The decision timeframe for SAS applications is typically around two working days once all required information is provided.

If you're thinking about applying for Medicinal Marijuana, you should first start by having a conversation with your GP. If your GP determines that conventional treatments are insufficient for your needs, they may be open to exploring Medicinal Cannabis as an option. They can then apply to the TGA for special access. After the waiting period, if approved, your GP can then write you a script for a specific product.

However, it's important to note that even if the TGA grants approval for your GP to prescribe a Medicinal Cannabis product, the product's supplier (known as the sponsor) is not obligated to supply it. If the supplier cannot provide the product, the doctor may need to seek an alternative, which could involve submitting a new application to the TGA for a different product.

This process is vastly simplified for patients at Rise Dispensary. All of our doctors have been pre-approved by the TGA to assess and prescribe Medicinal Marijuana to people with qualifying conditions that have not responded to traditional medicines. Our doctors, known as Authorised Prescribers, can prescribe Medicinal Cannabis without waiting two days on individual approval from the TGA for each patient. Our on-site pharmacies are well stocked to supply patients with their prescriptions directly after seeing the doctor. Rise's Authorised Prescribers are aware of which products are available and in stock when writing your prescription. This takes a lot of time and hassle out of sourcing your medicine once you have been prescribed.

## Will Medical Cannabis Work for Me?

Medicinal Cannabis offers potential benefits for certain medical conditions including:

- Chronic pain
- Anxiety, PTSD, and depression
- Epilepsy
- Insomnia
- Chemotherapy symptoms such as nausea
- Anorexia
- Multiple sclerosis
- Palliative care

Before considering Medicinal Cannabis, it's essential to consult with a doctor to explore all available treatment options. While Medicinal Cannabis may not be subsidised, and some products can be costly, legal access ensures that patients receive a product that meets established quality standards.

## Informed Consent and Alternative Treatments

Before a doctor prescribes an unapproved Medicinal Cannabis product, they must obtain informed consent from the patient. This means explaining the potential benefits, risks, and any known side effects, along with other available treatment options. The patient must be aware

that the TGA has not assessed the safety, quality, or efficacy of the product, and they need to weigh these factors carefully before proceeding with the treatment.

Doctors are also required to have the appropriate qualifications and expertise to treat the patient's specific condition. If the prescribing doctor is not a specialist, the TGA may request a report from an appropriate specialist before approving access to Medicinal Cannabis.

## What About Addiction and Side Effects?

Negative side effects can include feeling a little lightheaded or drowsy, vertigo or nausea, decreased or increased appetite, and a dry mouth, however, much depends on your dose, the product you're using and your personal tolerance. Patients who have been prescribed Medicinal Cannabis are not likely to become addicted and it can be relatively easy to stop using the medicine if you choose. Unlike many prescription medications, ceasing Medicinal Cannabis doesn't usually result in major side effects.

While Medicinal Cannabis can be safer for many patients than other treatments, it is not suitable for everyone, particularly those with heart or certain mental health conditions. If you don't have disqualifying conditions, you are not at risk of dying from using Medicinal Cannabis and there are no known cases of death from overdose. Your dose will be carefully determined by your doctor during the first few weeks of treatment. Once you go through the initial period of working with your Rise doctor to determine the right dose for you, you will be unlikely to experience any negative side effect at all.

## Medical Cannabis and the Law

Medicinal Cannabis products are not subsidised through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) in Australia. The price is determined by the supplier, which can make some of the treatments costly. It's essential, however, to avoid purchasing Medicinal Cannabis online or from other sources, as doing so could result in acquiring illegal or unsafe products, as well as potentially breaking the law.

Legal access to Medicinal Cannabis is strictly controlled, meaning that only a prescription from a registered doctor, filled through a TGA approved pharmacy, ensures the use of regulated products. This approach is designed to protect patients from potential harm and to ensure that products meet certain standards.

Legally speaking, you are not allowed to smoke the Cannabis plant or flowers in Australia. If prescribed the flower, you may only use it in a TGA approved vaporiser device. Like cigarette smoking and nicotine vaping, you will also find there are many locations and circumstances in which you cannot use your cannabis vaporiser. Enclosed spaces, in the presence of children, smoke-free areas, and health facilities are just some of the situations to avoid using your Cannabis vaporiser in order to ensure you're not breaking any laws.

The final legal risk to consider is driving. It's illegal to operate a motor vehicle in Australia if you have Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) in your system. Medicinal Marijuana products will contain cannabinoids – the active ingredients that produce a medical result – in different strengths. While it's safe to drive if your medicine contains only cannabidiol (CBD), if your product contains any THC, you must arrange alternative transportation to comply with the law.

## Importing and Travelling with Medicinal Cannabis

Bringing Medicinal Cannabis into Australia is tightly regulated and not recommended. The personal importation of Medicinal Cannabis is subject to strict controls, including the need for an import permit from the Office of Drug Control and compliance with state and territory laws.

There are also specific regulations around travelling with Medicinal Cannabis products. It is always recommended to research the laws in the places you wish to travel, as some locations may fine or imprison people carrying the medicine, even if you do have a valid Australian prescription. In some cases, you may be able to attain special exemptions to travel internationally with your medicine.

## The Future of Medicinal Cannabis in Australia

As research into the therapeutic benefits of cannabis continues to evolve, the regulatory landscape in Australia may also change. The TGA, in collaboration with state and territory governments, continues to develop Medicinal Cannabis guidelines and educational materials for doctors. These resources aim to help healthcare professionals make informed decisions and ensures that patients receive appropriate care.

There is a wealth of information for patients available on the TGA website. If you are interested in exploring Medicinal Cannabis as a treatment option, you can start by discussing your condition with a qualified healthcare professional. If your GP is not open to discussing Medicinal Marijuana with you, the Authorised Prescribers at Rise can help you with being assessed for eligibility.

Rise Dispensary's doctors and pharmacists are always up to date with the latest TGA and government rules surrounding Medicinal Cannabis. This ensures that we can make an informed decision based on the latest medical advice and regulatory requirements.

*If you have further questions, the TGA website provides valuable resources and information, or contact us at Rise Dispensary.*