



Doctors are increasingly recommending cannabis to treat a variety of health conditions.

HEALTH ENLIGHTENMENT

How cannabis may help stomp out pain, ease anxiety, relieve PMS symptoms, make your skin glow and more...much more.

BY / BARBARA BRODY



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Two years ago, Marisa Zeppieri reached her breaking point. Since being diagnosed with lupus, an autoimmune disorder, she'd tried just about every prescription pain reliever out there to cope with joint and muscle pain. After a series of allergic reactions, she'd decided to stick with over-the-counter Tylenol, but she was taking more and more and not getting relief. At a friend's urging, she finally gave cannabis a try. "Within 10 minutes, the pain was gone," says

Zeppieri. "I couldn't believe it." Zeppieri, now 40, says she wishes she had turned to the plant sooner. What held her back, she admits, was fear and a lack of knowledge. "I grew up in a community where [marijuana] was 'bad,'" she says. "I didn't understand that it's the CBD that helps most with chronic pain, and that's not what gets you high." Cannabidiol, or CBD for short, is the main chemical compound in weed believed to be responsible for a slew

of health benefits. The other main "active ingredient" is THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), a psychoactive compound that makes users feel high. You'll find CBD in both marijuana and hemp, which are different varieties of the cannabis plant, but hemp usually contains only trace amounts of THC.

CBD-only products that are derived from hemp and contain less than 0.3% THC (the federal threshold) are more widely available throughout the U.S. Many of these products are also designed to promote dewier skin (like the CannaSmack Luxe line) or smooth out wrinkles (like Cannabliss Organics Age Defying Lotion).

It's not just hype, says Joshua Zeichner, M.D., director of cosmetic and clinical research in dermatology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. "CBD binds to receptors in the skin and has soothing properties. The oil itself is rich in fatty acids and emollient ingredients that hydrate and soothe the skin."

There are also a number of CBD-only products, like Sagely Natural Relief & Recovery Cream, that are aimed at easing run-of-the-mill aches. Hemp-derived products are legal throughout the country, and some

people find that CBD alone is enough to ease their discomfort, whether they're plagued by arthritis, migraines or sore muscles. But for more severe pain, you might need to add some THC in the mix.

"It's very patient-specific, but a blend of THC and CBD tends to be most effective," says Laura Borgelt, Pharm.D., a professor at the University of Colorado Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences. She says that there's a synergistic effect between the two compounds, and, in some cases, a relatively small amount of THC is all that's needed.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO GET HIGH

Aliza Sherman lives in Alaska, where marijuana is legal for recreational as well as medical use. She says she doesn't frown on people who use the drug recreationally, but that she herself had no interest in doing so when she started researching cannabis in early 2016.

"I had arthritis in my neck, and I had tried all sort of things and nothing was working," she says. Her initial intrigue eventually led her to found Ellementa, an online and in-person network for women who are interested in cannabis for health and wellness. The more she learned, the more she realized that everything she thought she knew about the drug was wrong.

"I was so afraid it was going to mess up my brain," recalls Sherman, who says she discovered that the reason cannabis was historically prohibited was mostly political. "It is not a dangerous 'gateway' drug." In fact, some physicians are now using marijuana to help their patients wean off opioids.

Today, Sherman is an occasional user; cannabis eases her neck pain and helps her sleep when her mind

is racing. She enjoys visiting new marijuana shops to explore their offerings—in Alaska, it's similar to walking into a liquor store—but she admits that some retailers do a better job of catering to mature women than others. "I walked into this beautiful store the other day, and the guy behind the counter said, 'You can get really messed up with this.' And I was thinking, 'Come on. I'm 53; I have silver hair. That's not what I'm looking for.'"

If that's not what you're looking for, either, you'll want to pay close attention to the CBD-to-THC ratio.

Not only is CBD packed with medicinal properties, but it also tempers the psychoactive effects of THC, says Borgelt. Assuming you live in a state where medical marijuana is legal, ask your doctor to make some initial suggestions. "If a strain is CBD-rich, the CBD to THC ratio might be 20:1 or 50:1," she says.

Your dose matters too, and it turns out that less is often more effective for a variety of symptoms, says Dustin Sulak, D.O., an integrative medicine physician in Maine and founder of Healer.com, a site focused on educating patients about medical



Sherman, Ellementa's founder, is on a mission to educate women.



HelloMD helps find the right doctor for the right dosage of medical marijuana.

“CANNABIS IS GAINING TRACTION AMONG HEALTH PROFESSIONALS.”

marijuana. He's a fan of microdosing, which he defines as “using a dose of THC that is below the threshold of impairment and other unwanted psychoactive effects. For most people, this is less than 5 mg [THC].”

ONE DRUG, MANY BENEFITS

To understand why a smaller amount of cannabis usually works better, you need to know a little about how the drug works in general. In short, it boils down to the endocannabinoid system. In the 1990s, scientists discovered this body system, which runs from head to toe and sometimes overlaps with the central nervous system, Borgelt explains. “A lot of times, people overstimulate the receptors, which can have adverse effects,” she says.

The presence of cannabinoid receptors all over your body explains why cannabis may be useful for a wide array of ailments. The other part of the puzzle: Cannabis isn't really one drug; the plant is packed with “hundreds of different compounds,” says Sherman.

As more about cannabis is being uncovered by scientists, it's gaining traction among health-care professionals. This past April, an FDA advisory panel recommended the approval of Epidiolex to treat seizures. And although there's no THC in it, it's poised to become the first cannabis-derived prescription medication in the U.S.

Aside from seizures, the best proven uses for cannabis are for chronic pain, chemo-associated nausea and muscle spasms related to

multiple sclerosis, according to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. There's also some solid research to support its use for sleep problems, especially in people with pain disorders or neurological ailments.

Other small studies—and anecdotal reports—suggest that cannabis might help with everything from severe menstrual cramps and sexual dysfunction to migraines and anxiety. Choosing the right strain is important: One might increase appetite, whereas another could actually suppress it, notes Sherman. “It's not a cure-all, and it's not ‘one plant fits all.’ It's more like different versions of this plant can fit some things,” she says.

If you have a medical marijuana card, you can walk into a dispensary and ask for recommendations based on what has worked well for others with a similar condition. Another important benefit of buying from a legal dispensary is that it's regulated, so you can find out how much CBD and THC a product contains as well as get some info about its terpene (aromatic oil) profile.

SHOULD YOU TRY IT?

Many health experts, including Borgelt, believe that cannabis should be considered a last resort—at least until more research has been completed and better regulations are in place. “I don't think we're at the point where it's a first- or even second-line treatment,” she says. “But when other FDA-approved treatments aren't working, there may be times when cannabis can help.”

Matthew Mintz, M.D., a board-certified internist in Maryland who started prescribing medical marijuana earlier this year, says he's beginning to believe some patients might benefit from turning to cannabis sooner. “Prescription sleep medications work, but they interact

with a lot of other medicines and there are lots of side effects,” he notes. “NSAIDs, including ibuprofen, can mess with your kidneys and cause stomach problems. Cannabis doesn't do any of that. There are very few side effects and almost no interactions with other drugs.”

That said, interactions are not impossible, especially when it comes to THC. It's best to discuss your needs with a doctor, who should also be able to weigh in on delivery methods.

Cannabis is available in so many different forms, from topical salves, patches and suppositories to edibles, tinctures, vape pens and joints. If your goal is to get healthier—not just high—steer clear of joints. For those who like to inhale, vaping is a better option. “The combustion is a problem. The carbon gets in your lungs and destroys them,” says Mintz.

Borgelt prefers liquid tinctures, which you swallow or put under your tongue. “With a tincture, you're getting a known dose, and it's easier to adjust. With vaping, it depends on how deep you're inhaling, how long you hold your breath, etc.”

If medical marijuana is legal in your state but you're having trouble finding an expert to guide you, Zeppieri suggests heading to HelloMD, a website she used to connect with a physician who reviewed her medical records and discussed her symptoms before writing a prescription.

Zeppieri knows that some people still question whether cannabis is a legitimate medication. She gets it—she used to be among the skeptics; but she now says that anyone who's in pain should give it a try. “I've spoken to hundreds of [lupus] patients,” says Zeppieri, who founded the website LupusChick. “Everyone who's tried it has been able to lower their dose of prescription pain medication or get off it completely.”



Our Experts



MATTHEW MINTZ, M.D.
Located in Bethesda, Maryland, Mintz is a certifying provider by Maryland Medical Cannabis Commission (MMCC) and one of the few physicians in the state who can issue a letter of recommendation for qualifying patients to receive medical marijuana in Maryland.



LAURA BORGELT, PHARM.D.
An associate professor at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, Borgelt focuses on women's health. Her initial interest in medical marijuana started when she was asked clinical questions about its use in pregnant and lactating women.