

CBD and Arthritis

ARTHRITIS ACTION FACTSHEETS



Cannabinoids are compounds found in the cannabis plant. CBD (short for cannabidiol) is an example of a chemical called a phytocannabinoid or plant-based cannabinoid. There are more than 100 different types of cannabinoids that can be extracted from the cannabis plant. The two most well-known are CBD which does not cause a “high” sensation and THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) which is the substance in street cannabis that causes intoxication.

Cannabis and THC-containing products are illegal in the UK but can be prescribed as cannabis-based medical products by specialist medical prescribers.

Is CBD legal?

CBD is non-intoxicating and so is legal in the UK and can be bought over the counter provided the product contains less than 0.2% THC and provided it has been grown from an industrial hemp strain that has been approved in the UK.

How do I know what I am buying?

In the UK, CBD products are classified as “novel food” items to ensure that they have been through an independent safety process, however they are not classified as medicines so have not been through the extensive testing that is a legal requirement for all conventional medicines.

The CBD market has exploded in recent years with manufacturers producing oils, gels, creams, edibles and even water containing CBD. Many manufacturers claim dramatic health benefits which

have not been proven. Even worse, a study has shown that more than 60% of CBD containing products in the UK do not contain the amount of CBD stated on the label, many contain illegal quantities of THC, and others contain contaminants such as pesticides and heavy metals (<https://phytovistalabs.com/2019/09/11/howbad-is-cbd-oil-mislabelling-in-the-uk/>).

Medical cannabis products can also be bought online but there is absolutely no guarantee that what you buy is safe, or legal or contains what the sellers claim. These may be potentially harmful.

What does CBD do to the body?

As well as cannabinoids that come from plants, the body has its own natural cannabinoids called endocannabinoids which work on the endocannabinoid system which is important in regulating pain, mood, sleep, appetite, fertility and many other bodily systems. CBD (and THC) bind to endocannabinoid receptors which are present in many different tissues in the body. Evidence is emerging from trials in humans and animals that CBD may help with anxiety and insomnia. Currently we don't know whether CBD can help with pain or inflammation in arthritis and CBD is not currently approved by NICE for these conditions, although research is ongoing. Historically, cannabis plants have been used as medicines for more than 2000 years, however in the modern world, scientific evidence in the form of randomised controlled trials is needed before any medicine can be approved, and as with any medicine, there may be a large placebo effect.

Does CBD have any side effects?

As with any substance that interacts with receptors in the body, CBD can have side effects. Common side effects include dry mouth, diarrhoea and drowsiness although these are usually mild. CBD can also interact with blood thinners including clopidogrel.

Will CBD products help my arthritis?

There is currently no evidence that CBD containing products have any effect on the symptoms of arthritis. One small study in mice found that CBD oil applied to the skin may help inflammation in osteoarthritis (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4851925/>) but evidence in humans is lacking.

What conditions can cannabis be legally prescribed for?

The medical use of cannabis was legalised in the UK in November 2018, however very few people on the NHS are prescribed medical cannabis as guidelines limit use to only 3 conditions: children with severe treatment-resistant epilepsy, multiple sclerosis with severe muscle spasm and for severe chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting. NICE do not currently recommend cannabis based medical products for people with chronic pain, however outside the NHS, medical cannabis can be prescribed by specialist doctors for conditions such as pain, insomnia and anxiety and depression, although this remains an expensive option.