

### **Legalization of Cannabis**

### **A Guide for Manitoba Physiotherapists**

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#### **Introduction:**

The use of recreational cannabis became legal in Canada in 2018, while the administration of cannabis for medical purposes was available years earlier. Whether used recreationally or for medical purposes it is important that physiotherapists educate themselves about their roles and responsibilities when treating patients who use cannabis.

The College's position is that physiotherapists and student physiotherapists are expected to comply with all their existing professional expectations, including those set out in relevant legislation, the Code of Ethics, and College practice directions and policies. Cannabis should be treated in much the same way as alcohol or prescription pain medications. Although the substances are different, the effects are similar, and issues of impairment and consent are largely the same.

#### **What do we know about cannabis?**

According to the World Health Organization<sup>1</sup>, Cannabis is a generic term used to denote the several psychoactive preparations of the plant *Cannabis sativa*.

#### **Cannabinoids**

Cannabinoids are the chemical compounds found in cannabis that react with various neuroreceptors in the body to produce the desired effects. The two cannabinoids that are most clinically relevant are:

- Delta 9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) the cannabinoid responsible for the physical and psychotropic effects or the “high” commonly associated with use.
- Cannabidiol (CBD) is the compound that produces many of the therapeutic effects with little to no appreciable psychoactive properties, including pain relief, decreased

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<sup>1</sup> *Alcohol, Drugs and Addictive Behaviours: Cannabis* accessed December 2025 at: <https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/alcohol-drugs-and-addictive-behaviours/drugs-psychoactive/cannabis>

inflammation, decreased spasticity, nausea relief, and antiseizure effects.<sup>2</sup>

Cannabinoids can be ingested, inhaled, vaporized or applied externally. When the drug is delivered by inhaling or vaporizing the effects can be within minutes, peaking within 15-30 minutes, and lasting for up to 2-3 hours. When ingested through edible products the effects may take longer to be felt (up to 30- 90 minutes) and can last for 4-12 hours<sup>3</sup>

Physiotherapists may already be working with individuals who are using some form of medical cannabis or may encounter individuals who they suspect are using it recreationally.

Cannabis can:

1. Increase heart rate and lower blood pressure. Physiotherapists should carefully monitor these variables in patients during exercise and chart accordingly.<sup>3</sup>
2. Cause short term memory impairments in cognition, memory, and alertness impairing an individual's ability to give informed consent and effect their ability to think and react quickly. For example, the ability to make quick decisions when driving may be impaired.<sup>3</sup>
3. Have adverse effects on coordination, reaction time, and balance. This may increase the risk of falls and other accidents, especially in older adults or others with neuromuscular conditions, while working with a physiotherapist.<sup>3</sup>
4. Have negative effects on mood, including confusion, hallucinations, panic reactions, paranoia and acute psychotic events.<sup>4</sup>

**Other items physiotherapists may wish to consider:**

### **No Smoking Policies**

The same no smoking policies apply whether it's tobacco or cannabis. If a physiotherapist or clinic does not already have a policy in place, they may want to develop one.

According to the law, people who use cannabis recreationally cannot smoke or vape cannabis in public. For more information, visit the Government of Manitoba website:

<https://www.gov.mb.ca/cannabis/knowthelaw/cantuseinpublic.html>

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<sup>2</sup> Information for Health Care Professional: Cannabis (marihuana, marijuana) and the cannabinoids accessed December 2018 at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/information-medical-practitioners/information-health-care-professionals-cannabis-cannabinoids.html>

<sup>3</sup> Health Effects of Cannabis: Government of Canada Fact Sheet accessed December 5, 2025, at: <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/hc-sc/documents/services/campaigns/27-16-1808-Factsheet-Health-Effects-eng-web.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Government of Canada: Cannabis in Canada accessed on December 5, 2025, at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/campaigns/cannabis/health-effects.html>

Anyone who uses medical cannabis can smoke or vape medical cannabis in outdoor public spaces except for the restrictions listed on the Government of Manitoba website:

<https://www.gov.mb.ca/cannabis/knowthefacts/medicalcannabis.html>

Please refer to the Manitoba government website for general cannabis information at:

<https://www.gov.mb.ca/cannabis/index.html>

### **Scent-Free Policies**

If a physiotherapist or clinic has a scent-free policy and the person smells strongly of cannabis, a physiotherapist would be expected to manage this situation in the same way they would if person were wearing a strong-smelling perfume or smelled of tobacco—ask them to wash the scent off and refrain from presenting with the scent on their person in future. In the case of smoking, the person may need to change their clothing.

### **Incorporating Cannabis into PT Practice**

Remember, physiotherapists can't recommend, sell, administer or prescribe drugs, including cannabis. If a patient is considering cannabis as a treatment adjunct, refer them to an appropriate professional who can recommend or prescribe. Note that only doctors and nurse practitioners can authorize/prescribe medical marijuana in Manitoba.

### ***What questions can a physiotherapist ask?***

Part of a physiotherapist's routine assessment has always included a detailed history taking including asking about medication (prescription and non-prescription) use. Physiotherapists should discuss cannabis use with their patients, similar to the manner of discussing alcohol or cigarette smoking. Patients may not immediately report cannabis use, but over time a physiotherapist may become aware of their cannabis use. Ensure this is documented accordingly in the patients' health record and keep in mind the effects cannabis use may have on an individual (i.e. masking pain, decreased coordination and balance etc.) and adjust the physiotherapy treatment accordingly.

### **Refusing Treatment**

#### ***What if a patient shows up for treatment and is under the influence of cannabis?***

A physiotherapist is expected to manage this situation as they would if a patient attended an appointment intoxicated and were either not capable of providing consent or treatment would be risky to them in their condition. The physiotherapist would refuse treatment.

Every time someone arrives for an appointment, a physiotherapist needs to decide if the person can provide consent. A physiotherapist should start by assuming that the patient is

capable, unless they are obviously impaired.

If the person is obviously impaired, either from non-prescription or prescription medication including cannabis, or alcohol, inform them that physiotherapy treatment cannot be provided because they appear to be impaired. The physiotherapist must document the facts (i.e. unable to treat the patient because of suspected impaired judgement) in the physiotherapy records. Reschedule and ask that the patient refrain from drinking or using cannabis before their next appointment.

### **Personal Use**

If a physiotherapist decides to use cannabis, they must ensure that they are in no way impaired when providing treatment to patients. Remember the effects from cannabis can remain with a person for hours after use. Performance of complex task may even be impaired for as long as 24 hours<sup>5</sup>. Adhere to the employer policies and ensure there is no risk to patients.

### **Human Rights**

#### ***What if a patient uses cannabis medicinally rather than recreationally?***

Whether a client's cannabis use is medically authorized or not, physiotherapists must use this information to inform the physiotherapy process and use their knowledge, skill and judgment during physiotherapy care delivery.

Regardless of why the patient is using, if they're not capable of consenting because their judgment is impaired, a physiotherapist should refuse treatment. Be sure to be respectful and non-judgmental in the communication to the patient, and remember, cannabis use does not necessarily result in impaired judgement.

### **Additional Resources for the Health Care Professional:**

Driving while impaired by alcohol or drugs accessed December 2025 at:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/talking-about-drugs/driving-impaired-drug.html>

Manitoba Public Insurance: Impaired Driving accessed December 2025 at:

<https://www.mpi.mb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ImpairedDriving.pdf?v=1750175410>

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<sup>5</sup> Government of Canada: Cannabis in Canada accessed on December 5, 2025, at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/health/campaigns/cannabis/health-effects.html>

Manitoba Public Insurance: Impaired Driving Suspensions accessed December 2025 at:

<https://www.mpi.mb.ca/impaired-driving-suspensions/>

Manitoba Government – Cannabis: For Health Care Professionals accesses December 2025 at:

<https://www.gov.mb.ca/health/cannabis/hcp.html>

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