

# Medical Cannabis 101

*Choosing Medicine*





## Medical Cannabis 101: Choosing Medicine

Most of California's legally-qualified patients obtain their medication from dispensaries. In fact, there are more than one hundred cooperatives, collectives, dispensaries, and the like across the state. Patients are now confronting a surprisingly large number of choices when deciding what medicine to use. This booklet is designed to help you make the best choice for you.

We do not yet have standardized measurements and labels for medical cannabis, so there is often a process of trial and error involved in picking medication. An individual patient must decide what variety works best for their condition, and in what dose. This is why it is so important to think critically about which variety you use and its effects. Your feedback is helping to establish a body of anecdotal evidence about strains and dosage that is invaluable.

Quality is a subjective term. No one can say that one strain of medicine is innately better than another. You can, however, determine what is best for you. When evaluating medicine at your dispensary, consider the criteria below.

### **Indica or Sativa?**

The terms *indica* and *sativa* refer to the two most common types of cannabis plants. Many of the strains being cultivated today are blends of both types. A blend can be predominately indica, predominately sativa, or evenly mixed between the two. The table below discusses some of the differences between the two. Remember that these are generalizations, and specific varieties may vary in their characteristics.

<i>Cannabis indica</i>	<i>Cannabis sativa</i>
Heavier body effects	More pronounced head effects
Sleepy, slowed down feeling	Energetic, up feeling
Higher levels of CBN and CBD <sup>1</sup> to THC	Higher levels of THC to CBN and CBD

### **Indoor or Outdoor?**

Cannabis can be grown outdoors in natural sunlight or indoors using special lamps designed for that purpose. Outdoor plants usually grow much larger than indoor plants and yield more medication. Indoor cannabis plants tend to be smaller, but often produce finished medication that is more potent. This is because a skillful indoor cultivator can control elements that influence the outcome of a garden more readily than he or she could

---

<sup>1</sup> Cannabinol (CBN) and cannabidiol (CBD) are molecules in cannabis that are likely associated with pain relief. THC is the more commonly known molecule that is associated with feelings of intoxication and euphoria.

outdoors. Temperature, humidity, amount of water, quantities of fertilizer, intensity of light, insects, mold, mildew, and damage by natural element may all impact the quality of finished medication. Indoor medication is generally more popular than outdoor medication, although a lot of fine medicine is still grown outdoors.

### **Organic or Chemical Fertilizers?**

Growers may choose organic fertilizers or chemical ones. Organic fertilizers are preferable as they are less likely to introduce toxins to the patient who uses the medicine or into the environment. Many patients report that organically grown cannabis tastes better than chemically fertilized medicine. Organic cultivation is gaining popularity among medical growers. You can encourage this trend by using organic medication whenever possible. You may also ask your dispensary operator to provide more organic options.

### **Aroma**

The smell of a variety of medication is often a good way to evaluate and identify it. One of the great things about cannabis is the wide variety of aromas it produces. There is not one correct smell for medicine. The aroma of various strains can be described as pungent, fruity, spicy, woody, skunky, and more. You should be wary of medication smells moldy or like old hay. This may indicate the presence of molds and mildews that may be harmful. You should also avoid medication that smells of perfume or other chemicals that may have been added to mask or alter the odor after it was harvested.

The aroma of medical cannabis deteriorates after harvest. Try breaking a small piece of the sample off to expose a new part of the flower to air. This may give you a better idea of the original aroma of the sample.

### **Resin Content**

The crystal-like resin glands on the surface that make cannabis flowers look sticky are called *trichomes*. This is where most of the active ingredients in cannabis are stored. When evaluating a sample of cannabis, check first for trichomes on the outside of the flower. A small magnifying glass is useful for this purpose. The absence of these crystals indicates a lack of potency or that the sample has been *kifed*. Kifing is a process in which cannabis flowers are shaken gently to remove the trichomes for consumption alone. This is where the product known as *kif* comes from. Avoid acquiring kifed cannabis as most of the active ingredients are gone. It is not ethical for dispensaries to provide kifed medication to patients. Medication grown outdoors will naturally have fewer trichomes as it has been exposed to the elements during its growth.

As with all criteria for picking cannabis, the presence of trichomes is not a fool proof method of picking quality medication. Some healthy, un-kifed varieties may naturally produce fewer trichomes.

## **Texture**

The texture, or *cure*, of cannabis has an impact on its overall value to a patient. Medical cannabis should be dry to the touch, but not brittle. Excess moisture will eventually lead to mold and mildew, while medication that is too dry will crumble and burn too quickly. You can check for excess moisture by bending a stem in the medicine. If it snaps, it is likely dry enough. If it bends, there is probably too much moisture still in it.

It is possible to remoisten medicine that is too dry. Place the medication in a plastic zip lock bag with a small piece of damp paper towel. Do not allow the paper towel to come into contact with the medicine. Leave the bag sealed for a few hours so that the humidity inside rises. The medicine will soak up the moisture inside the bag. Check the texture after 2-3 hours and repeat as needed. Leave the bag open if the medication seems too wet after remoistening.

## **Mold and Mildew**

Cannabis plants are susceptible to mold and mildew. No one knows whether or not mold or mildew on smoked cannabis represents a threat to the health of the patient, but it is best to avoid it. *This is especially true if you have a compromised immune system or allergies.* Mold is usually found as patches of gray or black growth on the inside of cannabis flowers and on the stems. Some types of dark colored mold grow in thin sheets on the outside of the flower.

Mildew can be found on any part of the plant. There is a particular kind of mildew known as *white powdery mildew* that is very common on cannabis plants. White powder mildew is a fluffy white growth that is often mistaken for trichomes on a flower. It can be distinguished as a slightly brighter shade of white than the trichomes. Be ware of flowers with two different white colors on them. Additionally, mildew will appear “fluffy,” while trichomes have a “wet” or “sticky” appearance. Use a magnifying glass to check for mildew on cannabis and on cuttings (“clones”).

## **About Variety Names**

There has been a tremendous expansion in the number of varieties available at dispensaries in California in the last few years, and it is not uncommon to see dozens from which to choose today. Many patients have come to rely on the name of the variety as a way to tell what they are getting. Unfortunately, variety names are not yet standardized statewide. In addition to remembering the name of a variety that works well for you, you should also try to remember other characteristics like appearance, smell, and texture so that you can identify again if it shows up with a different name.

Many names refer to varieties of medication that have established genetic traits that are similar from harvest to harvest. For example, you can anticipate that any variety of *Haze* will have a certain distinctive aroma. It takes a while to learn variety-specific characteristics, but doing so will help you get more reliable relief from your medicine. There are reference books available to help you learn about different strains.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> One popular reference book is Ed Rosenthal's “Big Book of Buds.”

Patient-cultivators sometimes cross-breed varieties to create a new variety that blends elements of the original two. For example, patient-cultivators have bred *Northern Lights* with *Big Bud* to produce a variety commonly called *Northern Lights x Big Bud* (the “x” is read as “crossed with”). A new cross may have different characteristics than its parents, and therefore may be more or less useful for an individual patient. It will take some trial and error to fully evaluate a cross of two known varieties.

Besides names that refer to common varieties, you will also see names that have been invented by a patient-cultivator to distinguish his or her harvest from others. These variety names may be entirely unique or variations on existing names. Sometimes these varieties will become popular and well known under the new names. At this point, the invented name may become an established variety name. In other cases, the patient-cultivator may invent a name because the real variety name is unknown.

There is an unfortunate and unethical activity that sometimes occurs when a variety becomes popular. Some patient-cultivators or dispensary operators will change the name of a less popular variety to trick patients into thinking it is the more popular one. This has been especially common in areas in which there are numerous dispensaries competing for patients. For example, if you are looking at a variety called *Kush* that does not look or smell like other *Kush* varieties you have seen in the past, you should be suspicious of the name.

Ethical dispensary operators will make every effort to label the medicine in the most accurate way possible. Likewise, ethical patient-cultivators will not misrepresent their medication. It will ultimately fall to the end consumer, however, to be aware and observant when acquiring medication. Do not be afraid to ask questions about variety names at your local dispensary.

## Cost

Almost everyone agrees that medical cannabis is too expensive. This is one of the many negative consequences that a policy of cannabis prohibition causes. Patients will be trapped in the shadow of the illicit market until state and federal laws change for the better. Other factors like scarcity and overhead at dispensaries make medication expensive as well. As with any rare and costly commodity, some providers will always exploit the situation by asking for unreasonable reimbursements for medicine.<sup>3</sup>

It is impossible to say what constitutes a fair reimbursement for medication. In general, the reimbursement should be about the same as at the other dispensaries in the area. At the time this was printed, patients were reimbursing their caregiver or dispensary between \$50 and \$60 dollars for one-eighth of an ounce (3.5 grams) of high-grade medication. This figure is only an estimate based on a non-scientific survey of dispensaries.

Since medical cannabis is not covered by insurance, you may need to adopt some cost-saving strategies to stay within your budget. You will find that some of the less expensive medication at a dispensary is effective in treating your symptoms, and may be pleasantly

---

<sup>3</sup> California Health and Safety Code §11362.765 (c) authorizes primary caregivers to receive reimbursement for medication provided to the patient for whom they are a caregiver. You can maintain the highest possible degree of legal integrity by always *reimbursing* your caregiver or dispensary for medicine instead of *buying* it.

surprised at its quality. Some patients manage to stretch their budget by acquiring a small amount of high-grade medicine and supplementing it with a larger amount of less expensive medicine.

Your local dispensary may be able to help you save money. Ask the dispensary operator if he or she provides discounts or specials. Some dispensaries actually offer free or low-cost medicine to those in need. There are even a handful of dispensaries that offer a frequent buyer program to reward regular visitors. If your dispensary does not offer these options, you may want to look for one that does.

### **Tracking What Works for You**

Different varieties of medical cannabis will have varying effects on individual patients. You will also find that the efficacy of medicine varies from harvest to harvest. Your body may also change its response to a variety over time (this is known as *tolerance*). All of this means it is often not possible to get a consistent effect from a given variety of medicine over a long period of time.

This is a challenge for patients using any natural herbal medicine. Unlike pharmaceutical drugs, herbs are subtle and changeable. We must be actively and consciously involved in the process of self-medication. Your personal body feed back will be the best indicator of which medicine is right for you. Pay close attention to the medical benefits you receive from a variety, the duration of the benefits, and any side effects you experience. Talk about these experiences with your doctor, other patients, or the dispensary staff. You may even want to keep a notebook to help you remember.

We are still in the very early days of legal medical cannabis in California. In a sense, we are all learning together. One day, there will be standardized labeling and weights for our medicine. There may even be scientifically valid information about the chemical make up of individual varieties.<sup>4</sup> Until then, we must rely on our own experience and that of other patients to get the greatest benefit from this remarkable medicine.

### **Choosing a Dispensary**

Most patients can not grow for themselves. That is why thousands of patients rely on more than one hundred dispensaries all over California. The dispensary model is far from perfect, but it does succeed in reliably providing medicine to an impressive number of patients. Dispensaries do not yet enjoy protection under state or federal law.<sup>5</sup> However, it is unlikely that you would ever face a legal problem because you visited or joined a dispensary. Dispensary operators, on the other hand, are taking a significant risk in order to provide safe access.

You have an ever-increasing number of dispensaries from which to choose. If you have access to more than one dispensary, consider these factors when choosing one:

---

<sup>4</sup> Be skeptical of labels that claim to represent content at this point. The equipment and expertise to do this analysis is scarce. Given the variable nature of herbal medicine, these labels are approximations at best – and deceptive at worst.

<sup>5</sup> The legal status of dispensaries under state law is evolving quickly, and there is a great variation in opinion among medical cannabis advocates as to what constitutes “legal.” For a more detailed discussion of the legal status of dispensaries, see Don Duncan’s “Medical Cannabis and Our Community,” available from ASA (see “Get Active” below).

- There should be a reasonable selection of medication at fair prices.
- Dispensaries should have a quality control process to avoid mold, mildew, and other contaminants.
- The dispensary should be accessible to disabled patients.
- The atmosphere should feel safe, clean, and pleasant.
- The staff should be professional and courteous. There is no reason to tolerate bad service at a dispensary!
- Many dispensaries support charitable causes and participate in the campaign to defend medical cannabis rights. If this is important to you, visit those dispensaries that reflect your values.
- Dispensaries should exclusively serve medical cannabis patients who are legally-qualified under the state law. Dispensaries that tolerate or encourage diversion for non-medical use put the legitimacy of our state law at risk. This is bad for all of us.

Dispensaries need patients to stay open. You have the ultimate power to encourage good dispensaries and help improve bad ones. It matters where you get your medicine, so ask questions and think critically about your choice.

### **Get Active**

Safe access has improved the lives of thousands of patients, but it did not happen by chance. An army of patients and advocates have struggled for years to pass compassionate laws and fight back the federal attack on medical cannabis. There is a lot of work to do in the nationwide campaign to defend medical cannabis rights. It is an empowering experience to participate in a movement like this and see the benefits in your own life and in the community around you.

The largest and most effective medical cannabis advocacy organization in the country is Americans for Safe Access (ASA). This organization has led the charge to protect patient and caregivers in California and change federal law. You can visit ASA on the Internet at [www.SafeAccessNow.org](http://www.SafeAccessNow.org) or call them toll free at (888) 929-4367.

### **About the Author**

Don Duncan has been active in the grassroots campaign for cannabis and medical cannabis law reform since 1994. He currently serves on the Board of Directors for Americans for Safe Access and other medical cannabis organizations. Mr. Duncan is the Co-Director of one of California's oldest and most reputable dispensaries with locations in Berkeley and West Hollywood. He has worked closely with elected officials, law enforcement, and community members in local implementation efforts in several California cities and counties.

Mr. Duncan is currently working on a book for publication in 2005 called *The ABC's of CBC's – How and Why to Open a Cannabis Buyer's Collective*. Direct inquiries to Don Duncan, 8424-A Santa Monica Blvd. #768, West Hollywood, CA 90069, or email [donduncan@yahoo.com](mailto:donduncan@yahoo.com).