



# RIA Reaching Others: Is Marijuana Medicine?

In January 2014, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that, through an executive order, New York would become the 21st U.S. state to permit the medical use of marijuana. New York's program would pave the way for up to 20 hospitals statewide to prescribe marijuana to people with certain serious or debilitating conditions. Since California became the first state to allow for medical marijuana use in 1996, 19 more states plus the District of Columbia have followed suit.

The use of medical marijuana has elicited strong opinions on both sides of the debate. Although the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) classifies marijuana as a Schedule I drug, defined as having "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse," studies have shown that marijuana can alleviate symptoms of certain diseases, such as glaucoma, cancer and HIV.

## First, the facts about marijuana

Marijuana is derived from the hemp plant *Cannabis Sativa* and is usually ingested by smoking. It is the most commonly used illicit drug in the U.S.

As a DEA-defined Schedule I drug, marijuana is considered to have the potential for severe psychological or physical dependence.

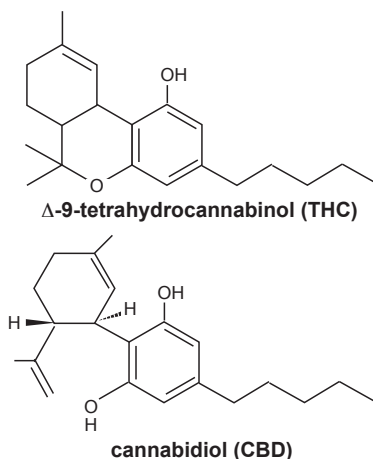
The main active ingredients in marijuana are tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD). THC is what causes the "high" from marijuana, as it acts upon the endocannabinoid system in the brain. Effects of marijuana can include distorted perception, impaired coordination, difficulty thinking and disrupted learning and memory.

Chronic marijuana use, especially if begun at a young age, has been shown to have a long-lasting negative impact on brain function.

## What, if any, are the medical benefits of marijuana?

Recent research suggests that marijuana can offer relief for the following conditions:

- ▶ **Glaucoma** – marijuana can lessen the pressure in the eyeball that leads to blindness
- ▶ **Cancer** – marijuana can reduce nausea caused by chemotherapy
- ▶ **HIV/AIDS** – THC is known to stimulate appetite (informally known as "the munchies"), which can be helpful for people who have difficulty gaining weight due to HIV/AIDS
- ▶ **Chronic pain** – THC has a mild to moderate painkilling effect
- ▶ **Epilepsy** – an oil derived from CBD has been shown to reduce seizures in children with a certain type of epilepsy
- ▶ **Multiple sclerosis** – CBD may help control dystonia (involuntary muscle movements)



In his State of the State address in January 2014, Governor Cuomo announced that New York would launch a program to research the feasibility of medical marijuana in New York, with the goal of providing relief to patients suffering from serious illnesses.

Governor Cuomo authorized the action using the Antonio G. Olivieri Controlled Substances Therapeutic Research Program, approved in 1980.

Up to 20 hospitals may be allowed to provide medical marijuana to patients being treated for serious illnesses. Eligible patients would be limited to those with "severe, life-threatening or debilitating conditions" such as cancer or glaucoma.

It is the Governor's intention that New York's program will be much more restrictive than, for example, California's program, which allows medical marijuana use for conditions as mild as backaches or anxiety. Other diseases or conditions, such as multiple sclerosis or epilepsy, would be eligible if they meet standards that will be set by the New York State Department of Health after public hearings on the issue.

A Siena College poll in May 2013 showed overwhelming support for medical marijuana: 82 percent of New York voters approved of the idea for seriously or terminally ill people.



## Arguments for medical marijuana use

- ▶ Studies have shown that marijuana can have a beneficial effect on certain conditions
- ▶ Other drugs approved by the FDA for similar medicinal purposes, such as opiates like Oxycontin or Vicodin, are highly addictive
- ▶ Many prescription drugs have the risk of overdose. Overdosing on marijuana is extremely rare
- ▶ It would help alleviate pain and suffering for many people

## What's the down side?

- ▶ Studies have shown that medical use of marijuana may "normalize" attitudes towards it and may lead people (especially youth) to believe it is not harmful at all – that it is, in fact, "good for you"
- ▶ The normalization of medical marijuana could lead to an increase in risky recreational use
- ▶ When medical treatment involves smoking marijuana, the side effects of the drug remain, including impaired judgment and slow reaction time. This can lead to risky situations, including affecting driving ability
- ▶ Marijuana has not been shown to be a "cure" for any disease; it just alleviates certain symptoms
- ▶ Marijuana can become addictive for some people
- ▶ It can have its own health consequences, such as lung cancer
- ▶ It can have adverse effects on some people with underlying psychiatric disorders, including bipolar disorder or schizophrenia

## Sources:

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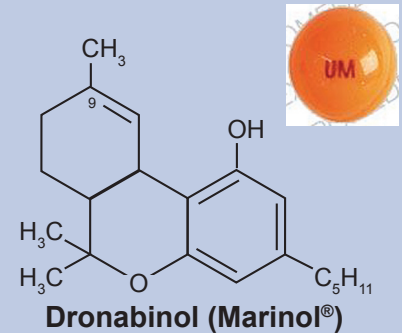
<http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/marijuana>

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<http://www.governor.ny.gov/press/01082014-agenda-outline-for-2014>

## Are there other drugs similar to medical marijuana?

- ✦ Marinol is the only U.S. FDA-approved synthetic cannabinoid. It is often marketed as a legal pharmaceutical alternative to natural cannabis. It is prescribed to treat or prevent nausea and vomiting caused by cancer medicines and to increase the appetite of people with AIDS.



- ✦ Several other cannabinoid-based drugs, such as Sativex, are currently seeking FDA approval



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