

Do cannabis-based medicines and medical cannabis relieve pain in adults with cancer?

Clinical Question	How safe and effective are cannabis-based medicines, including medical cannabis, for treating pain and other symptoms, in adults with cancer?
Bottom Line	<p>Nabiximols and THC did not differ from placebo in reducing pain, sleep problems, and opioid maintenance and breakthrough dosages. There was no clinically relevant benefit of nabiximols for the number of participants who reported that they were much or very much improved (NNTB 16, 95% CI 6 to 100). There was no difference between nabiximols and THC versus placebo with regards to the dropout rates due to adverse events and to the frequency of psychiatric disorders as adverse events. There was a clinically relevant harm by nabiximols and THC in the frequency of nervous system adverse events compared to placebo (NNTH 9, 95% CI 6 to 20). This review found that nabilone did not reduce pain associated with chemotherapy or radiochemotherapy in people with head and neck cancer and non-small cell lung cancer.</p> <p>This review also found that synthetic THC analogue was superior to placebo and not superior to codeine in reducing moderate-to-severe cancer pain after cessation of previous analgesic treatment for three to 4.5 hours</p>
Caveat	When nabiximols are administered oromucosally, plasma levels of THC and other CBs are lower compared with the levels achieved following inhalation of CBs at a similar dose. Insufficient plasma concentrations of nabiximols might be a potential cause of therapeutic failure in some participants of the studies analysed.
Context	Pain is a common symptom in people with cancer; 30% to 50% of people with cancer will experience moderate-to-severe pain. This can have a major negative impact on their quality of life. Opioid (morphine-like) medications are commonly used to treat moderate or severe cancer pain, and are recommended for this purpose in the World Health Organization (WHO) pain treatment ladder. Pain is not sufficiently relieved by opioid medications in 10% to 15% of people with cancer. In people with insufficient relief of cancer pain, new analgesics are needed to effectively and safely supplement or replace opioids.
Cochrane Systematic Review	Häuser W, Welsch P, Radbruch L, Fisher E, Bell RF, Moore RA. Cannabis-based medicines and medical cannabis for adults with cancer pain. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2023, Issue 6. Art. No.: CD014915. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD014915.pub2. This review contains 14 trials with a total of 1823 participants.

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Systematic review link:

<https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD014915.pub2/full>