



HAWAII MEDICAL CANNABIS NEWSLETTER

The Science

Using medical cannabis to manage cancer related symptoms

Written by Benjamin Caplan, MD

Dr. Caplan is a prominent expert in the field of medical cannabis with over two decades of experience in medical cannabis research and treatment innovation. The views expressed in this guest contribution do not represent the official position or endorsement of the Department of Health.

Cancer & treatment symptoms are tough

For many people going through cancer treatment or learning to live well in survivorship, the symptoms can feel endless. Common symptoms like pain, insomnia, nausea, loss of appetite and anxiety only add to the challenges of undergoing complex treatment plans and wellness regimens.

It's no surprise that many patients look beyond traditional treatments for help. Studies show that¹ between 25-40% of cancer patients turn to cannabis to manage their symptoms from treatment. But most do so without clinical guidance, which can lead to inconsistent relief and serious risks, like adverse drug interactions and overuse.

The benefits of cannabis for cancer patients

Cannabis is increasingly recognized as a valuable tool in the supportive care of people undergoing cancer treatment and those living in survivorship. When guided by clinical expertise, it can provide meaningful improvements in day-to-day quality of life. For example:



- **Relief from Pain.** Cannabinoids interact with the nervous system's CB1 and CB2 receptors, helping reduce cancer-related pain, including chemotherapy-induced neuropathy and radiation-related tissue pain.²⁻⁵
- **Improved Appetite and Nausea Control.** For patients struggling with appetite loss, nausea, or vomiting during treatment, carefully dosed cannabis can help stimulate hunger and ease gastrointestinal distress.⁶⁻¹²
- **Better Sleep and Reduced Anxiety.** Cancer care often disrupts rest. Low, controlled doses of THC and CBD have been shown to support deeper sleep, reduce nighttime awakenings, and calm anxiety.¹³⁻¹⁴

The key is responsible use. Cannabis works best when it's personalized, taking into account a patient's treatment plan, current medications, and symptom goals. With the right products and expert guidance, cannabis becomes a safe, effective complement to traditional cancer care.

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The future of cannabis in cancer symptom management

The role of cannabis in cancer care is growing. More providers and health systems are embracing clinician-led programs and using digital platforms to guide patients' use of cannabis. With this, patients can expect safer, more effective symptom relief and better quality of life, whether they're actively in treatment or in survivorship.

Considering cannabis? Here's what to do

For Patients:

- Talk with your care team before starting cannabis.
- Review all current medications for possible interactions.
- Track your symptoms and how they change over time.
- Use only trusted, legally compliant products from recommended sources.

For Providers:

- Explore how cannabis care can complement your patients' current treatment plans.
- Leverage medical cannabis CMEs offered by the Office of Medical Cannabis and Control and Regulation.
- Review American Society of Clinical Oncology Journal for guidance and information on talking to your cancer patients about cannabis.



Join a National Cancer Study

There are currently 12 clinics in Hawai'i participating in a clinical trial with the National Institute of Health, **National Cancer Institute**. This study is for patients newly diagnosed with cancer to assess cannabis use among patients treated in cancer clinics. More information on eligibility and how to [join](https://www.cancer.gov/research/participate/clinical-trials-search/v?id=NCI-2024-03314): <https://www.cancer.gov/research/participate/clinical-trials-search/v?id=NCI-2024-03314>

Be safe

Patients should tell their doctor if they use cannabis or other natural or alternative products. This helps the care team check for possible interactions with cancer treatments, especially immunotherapy drugs.

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What's New Hawai'i State Law

Act 241, SLH 2025 (HB302) expands the products Hawai'i's licensed dispensaries can offer. Under this new law, medical cannabis accessories, such as dry herb vaporizers, rolling papers, rolling trays, and grinders, may now be sold directly to qualifying patients, qualifying out-of-state patients, and caregivers at a dispensary retail location. This change helps patients, especially those with physical challenges, allowing them to obtain both their medicine and the tools needed to use it at one location, rather than traveling to multiple stores.

In addition, the law allows dispensaries to sell hemp-cannabinoid products, further increasing access and convenience for patients.



Act 269, SLH 2025 (HB1482) establishes that all businesses that sell hemp products in Hawai'i must register with the state. This new rule helps make sure that hemp products sold in stores are regulated for safety.

Please see the types of hemp products allowed to be sold in Hawai'i: [Interim Hemp Rules](#)

https://health.hawaii.gov/medicalcannabis/files/2024/12/11-37_InterimHempRulesSummaryFinal_12-6-24-v1.pdf

OMCCR acknowledges that these acts raise important questions and concerns in the medical cannabis community. We are committed to engaging in open dialogue through public listening sessions and the formal rule making process to address these concerns. Our aim is to support patients, caregivers, and providers through thoughtful implementation and community engagement.

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If you are needing to take medical cannabis by inhaling, consider **dry herb vaporizers**

Description: Devices that use dry cannabis flower plus heat to vaporize cannabinoids and terpenes.

Products: Handheld dry herb vaporizers and large tabletop devices.

Benefits: Dry herb vaporizers provide an alternative way to inhale medical cannabis without combustion, which may reduce some of the harms associated with smoking. By heating the cannabis instead of burning it, vaporizers can release cannabinoids and terpenes without producing smoke.¹⁵ However, any form of inhalation may still carry health risks.

Quick onset for immediate relief of certain symptoms. Less flower is needed to deliver the same effect as smoking. The heating process does not destroy or burn the cannabinoids and terpenes.

These products let you control the temperature, so you can activate certain cannabinoids and terpenes to get the effect you want.¹⁶

Limitations: They can be difficult for some patients to grasp and load with flower. Vaporizers can be costly.

Due to recent changes in law, licensed dispensaries in Hawaii may now offer these products. Contact your local dispensary for more information about available options for these products and other smoking alternatives.



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In the news

Check out OMCCR's Program Manager Andrew Goff on Hawai'i Public Radio (HPR) on How to keep keiki, kūpuna safe from cannabis poisoning.

<https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/the-conversation/2025-08-28/national-cases-of-cannabis-poisoning-among-children-rise>



HPR host Catherine Cruz interviewing Andrew Goff

Medical cannabis education day

On Saturday, August 16, OMCCR held a medical education event for patients and providers at the Kaua'i War Memorial Convention Hall. The gathering was an opportunity for patients to share their concerns and experiences and to ask questions about the use of medical cannabis.



Cannabinoid nurse educator Wendy Gibson-Viviani, PTA, RN, BSN speaking at Kaua'i Medical Cannabis Education Day

Speaker Wendy Gibson-Viviani, an active member of the American Cannabis Nurses Association and its Education Committee co-chair, appeared in person to guide patients through how to manage their pain symptoms using cannabis as an integrative medicine.

On live video, Dr. Codi Peterson provided a pharmacist's perspective on the endocannabinoid system and cannabinoid effects, and Dr. Janice Makela addressed dosing, titration and monitoring the body's responses to medical cannabis. Other information covered what questions to ask your providers, recent medical research findings, and drug interactions.

OMCCR is glad to support the health needs of our community and we look forward to seeing our registered patients and providers at our next event on **Maui on Saturday, November 8.**

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