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Cannabis Shopping Guide

This guide will help you easily navigate your shopping trip to a medical cannabis supplier, avoid common pitfalls, have a positive experience, and bring home the right medicine for our Introduction to Cannabis Program.

Patients who are new to medical cannabis often face challenges finding access to high quality medicines that meet their specific health needs. The cannabis marketplace is often unregulated, can be confusing, and the industry lacks standards in product labeling and dosage instructions. Availability of products can change quickly, and everyone seems to have different advice on what to buy.

By Dr. Dustin Sulak, Co-founder, Healer

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Step 1: Find a high quality medical cannabis producer.

The following steps can help you determine which cannabis producers and retailers are providing the highest quality products:

1. Talk with other patients. Word-of-mouth is often the best source of information about which cannabis producers are making the highest quality medicine. Consider attending a support group or chat with other patients in an online forum.
2. Call a local cannabis-testing laboratory and ask them which producers are consistently bringing in top quality and accurately-labeled products.
3. Call a few retailers and ask the following questions. By the time you get their responses, you'll likely be able to tell if they're the kind of establishment you want to buy medicine from.
 - a. Do you carry products that have been tested by an independent laboratory for potency and/or contamination (mold, bacteria, pesticides, solvents, heavy metals)? If so, are the test results or certificates of analysis (COAs) available to view?
 - b. Do you carry organic or pesticide-free products?
 - c. Do you sell non-smokable forms of cannabis, such as oils, tinctures or salves?
 - d. What is the average cost per gram or ounce of cannabis flower?

Step 2: On your first trip to the medical cannabis supplier.

1. Spend less than \$150 on medicine. Many new patients are convinced to buy much more than they need. You may also want to purchase a vaporizer for \$50-\$400 (more on vaporizers below).
2. Decide if you want to use a specific delivery method (e.g. inhalation, oral, topical). If you're not sure, I recommend trying both inhalation and oral for most conditions, plus topical if you're treating pain or skin conditions.
3. Purchase small amounts of a variety of different products. Products that appear to have similar contents based on the label may have different medical properties. Every person has an individualized response to cannabis, and the purpose of your first trip is to sample enough products to get a better idea of what's right for you.

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Shopping List

○ Raw Cannabis Flowers – for inhalation, tea or raw consumption

- Choose 2-4 varieties (often called strains) from the following categories and purchase 1-3 grams of each.
- Daytime variety: non-sedating, THC-dominant or combined THC/CBD
- Nighttime variety: (promotes sleep and relaxation)
- Condition specific varieties: ask the retailer which variety is the most popular with other customers who have your same symptoms.
- CBD-dominant non-impairing strain: excellent for daytime use, can promote focus on mental clarity, reduce anxiety, but sometimes not as effective as balanced THC/CBD or THC-dominant varieties.

If you're having trouble deciding which flower varieties to try, make your selection by choosing whichever has the most appealing aroma to you.[1]

Concentrates?

I rarely recommend inhaled concentrates for any of my patients, and encourage those new to cannabis to avoid them altogether. Fresh flower is safer and more effective, less likely to be contaminated and to produce tolerance.

○ Inhalation Device

- **Vaporizers:** Flower vaporizers heat the cannabis flower to a temperature that causes the therapeutic components to evaporate, but do not burn the plant material, producing a healthier and more cost-effective method to inhale cannabis. Tabletop, AC-powered models are often less expensive, easier to use and clean, and longer lasting. Portable, battery-operated models are discreet and convenient, but often more expensive. Your vaporizer should have a variable temperature gauge so you can control the smoke content of the vapor. Avoid products that expose plastic to high temperatures so you don't have to inhale plastic fumes. Before your first use of any vaporizer, set it on its maximum temperature for several minutes, then blow through it to expel any off-gasses that might be present. Be sure to ask about warranty coverage and customer support.
- **Smoking:** For those who inhale cannabis less frequently and don't want to spend the money on a vaporizer, or for those who have found that smoke works better for them than vapor, I suggest using a glass or stone pipe with a long stem, which can help the smoke cool down a little before reaching your throat. I usually recommend smoking without water filtration, since limited evidence has shown that the water filters out more of the beneficial compounds than the toxins; on the other hand, the water filtration cools and humidifies the smoke and some of my patients find it less irritating and more effective. Purchase a hemp/beeswax wick to light the cannabis flower so you can avoid inhaling lighter fumes.
- **Vape pens:** These products heat an oil that's been extracted from cannabis flowers. They are extremely convenient and discreet, but often fail to convey the full medical properties of vaporized flower or smoke, and pose significant risks of contamination and toxicity. Avoid products that use polyethylene glycol, glycerol, mct oil, vegetable oil and other solvents associated with toxic byproducts after heating. The products that contain only cannabis extract with no added diluents are likely the safest. Some vape oils are much stronger than smoke or flower vapor. Be sure to find out the THC potency of the oil – new users should avoid products with greater than 70% THC to allow for careful dosing and to avoid accidental overdose.

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○ Infused oil or tincture – for oral use

- In the world of cannabis, most liquid products are called “tinctures” regardless of their composition. Technically speaking, tinctures are alcohol based liquid extracts and oil-based liquids are called “infused oils.”
- Look for products that have been lab tested to contain a known potency (milligrams total cannabinoids per milliliter of tincture). Potencies in the range of 10 - 50 mg/ml work best for most users.
- Products that contain at least small quantities of the acidic cannabinoids (THCA and CBDA) have not been extensively heated and are likely to provide superior benefits.
- Most people new to cannabis do well with infused oils. Alcohol-based tinctures work very well but can be harsh in the mouth, and glycerin-based products are often very low in potency, but any of the three types of tinctures can make a good medicine if they’re prepared correctly and used in the right dosage.
- Most tinctures are made from a blend of varieties, which is great for getting started. If specific strain tinctures are available, choose based on your needs for daytime, nighttime, condition-specific, or CBD-dominant.
- Purchase a small size (the equivalent of 100-300 mg of cannabinoids) to evaluate the product.
- The milligrams of cannabinoids per drop depends on the potency, consistency of the liquid, and dropper size. If you plan on dosing by a certain number of drops, which is usually the easiest way to get started, look for a product that clearly tells you how much medicine is in each drop.
- Alternatively, you can use a 1ml oral syringe (available at most pharmacies) to measure an accurate volume of the oil and achieve a specific dose of cannabinoids.

○ Topical Cannabis Products

- Purchase a small amount to try on areas of pain, inflammation, or itching.
- More patients report effective relief with THC-dominant products, though some get great results with CBD-dominant or mixed THC/CBD products.
- Products that contain essential oils may have better skin penetration and efficacy. If you plan to use topical products anywhere near your face, or want to avoid menthol-like odors reaching the people near you, look for an unscented product.

○ What about hemp vs non-hemp CBD products?

- CBD-dominant products produced and sold within a legal medical cannabis program (non-hemp) often contain slightly higher levels of THC – they are still non-impairing but are often more effective.
- Many hemp-based CBD products are mislabeled and contaminated, while many medical cannabis programs require product testing for accuracy and purity.
- High-quality hemp-based products can be safe and effective, and can also be combined with THC-dominant products for stronger effects.

○ What does isolate, broad spectrum, and full spectrum mean?

- Many of the minor constituents found in cannabis (terpenes, flavonoids, acidic and minor cannabinoids, phytonutrients) likely work synergistically with the major cannabinoids THC and CBD.
- Isolate products do not contain these trace compounds and may be less effective at an equivalent dose, though some people have reported more consistent results with isolate products and may require higher dosage amounts.
- Products advertised as broad or full spectrum are more likely to contain the minor constituents, and may be more effective, though false advertising of this feature is prevalent. The industry seems to categorize products as broad spectrum if they do not contain THC and full spectrum for ones with THC.

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○ Endocannabinoid system-enhancing foods

- Hemp seeds
- Flax seeds (buy unground and grind at home in a coffee grinder)
- Chia Seeds
- Walnuts
- Sardines and anchovies
- Raw chocolate (cocoa nibs, raw cocoa powder)
- Dark chocolate (at least 70% dark)
- Maca root powder (good for smoothies)
- Unpasteurized fermented food (e.g. sauerkraut)

○ What to Avoid for Beginners:

- Edibles and capsules: these produce the most frequent adverse effects due to the delayed and erratic onset. Edibles may have variable potency from one serving to the next. After using a liquid preparation to identify one's optimal dose, you may then try an equivalent dose in a capsule for convenience to see if you achieve similar benefits.
- Concentrates (i.e. hash, kief, dabs, wax, shatter, FECO, RSO).
- Highest-potency THC-dominant varieties

What's Indica, Sativa, and Hybrid?

These terms describe three categories of cannabis varieties that may have distinct characteristics. Indica strains may be better for pain relief and more sedating. Sativa strains may be more energizing, mentally stimulating and mood elevating. Hybrid strains may offer the best of both worlds. In reality, these classifications are rarely an effective way to guide consumer choice. Use the guidelines above to find the best products instead of choosing based on indica vs sativa vs hybrid.

What about strain names?

While some varieties are named for their medicinal qualities, many have names that are not descriptive, and some not at all appropriate for a healing herb. Two products with the same strain name, from different producers or different harvests, may in fact have very different medicinal effects. The best way to distinguish between varieties is to look closely and observe the aroma.

[1] The compounds in cannabis that create the aroma, known as terpenes, are physiologically active and can modify the medicinal effect.

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[Medical Cannabis Health Provider Guide](#)

Dr. Sulak's succinct overview of the clinical information your medical providers will need to know to safely care for you and other patients who elect to use medical cannabis. [Learn more](#)

[Introduction to Cannabis Dosage Program](#)

Are you new to cannabis and not sure where to start? Using the correct dose of cannabis is the single most important factor in having a successful, therapeutic relationship with cannabis. Dr. Sulak will show you how to get the optimal benefits of cannabis at the lowest, effective dose, without any negative side effects. [Learn more](#)

[Cannabis Shopping Guide](#)

This guide will help you easily navigate your shopping trip to a cannabis supplier. You'll avoid common pitfalls, have a positive experience, save money, and purchase the right medicine for your therapeutic use. [Learn more](#)

[Medical Cannabis Opioid Guide](#)

Learn how thousands of people have used cannabis to help them reduce and replace opioid medications, as demonstrated in numerous recent scientific papers and strongly supported by animal research. [Learn more](#)

[Experienced Users - Sensitization Protocol Dosage Program](#)

Do you require more and more cannabis to get the same relief? This is a sign of cannabis tolerance. Learn how to use less, feel more, and experience superior medical benefits. [Learn more](#)

[Switching to a Cannabis Tincture Dosage Program](#)

Learn how to use a tincture to prevent your symptoms rather than chasing and treating them with inhalation after they occur. Use less medicine and experience improved results. [Learn more](#)

[Strategies for Non-Psychoactive Cannabis Use Dosage Program](#)

Dr. Sulak provides you with a number of strategies to help you get all the health benefits of cannabis without getting high or impaired. [Learn more](#)

[Endocannabinoid Diet & Activities Dosage Program](#)

Dr. Sulak outlines how specific foods and simple activities can help the endocannabinoid system function optimally, which is essential to improving your health. [Learn more](#)

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