

Cannabis Basics

What is cannabis?

Cannabis, commonly known as marijuana, weed, or pot, generally refers to the dried leaves, flowers, stems, and seeds from the cannabis plant (plant family Cannabaceae). Typical cannabis plants contain hundreds of compounds. The ones that you hear about the most are cannabinoids and terpenes.

- **THC** (tetrahydrocannabinol) – The psychoactive compound in cannabis responsible for creating the feeling of being “high.”
- **CBD** (cannabidiol) – The second most prevalent of the compounds in cannabis, usually derived from the hemp plant. Hemp is the same plant as cannabis, but specific strains are grown to meet the legal definition of having less than 0.3% THC. CBD is mostly used for medicinal or health-related purposes.
- **Other cannabinoids** – These come from trichomes (resin glands) found on the plant’s buds, flowers, and leaves. The effects of these cannabinoids are less well known and continue to be studied.
- **Terpenes** – Naturally occurring, highly aromatic compounds that determine the smell of many plants and herbs and contribute to their flavor. Terpenes make certain cannabis strains smell or taste different from others, and when combined with THC, can affect how cannabis makes you feel.
- **Flavonoids** – Groups of compounds found in foods and plants. These affect the taste and smell of cannabis and may contribute to some of the antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects.

Other Useful Definitions:

- **Cannabis cultivars (commonly called strains)**
The various unique cannabinoid and terpene combinations found in cannabis plants.
- **“Indica” or “Sativa” or “Hybrid”**
The two main classifications of cannabis are cannabis indica and cannabis sativa. “Hybrid” refers to a combination of both indica and sativa strains. There is a third classification, cannabis ruderalis, but it is much less common and contains a low amount of THC.

Cannabis indica is known for its relaxing effects, often described as feeling “stoned.” Cannabis sativa is known to produce an energizing or uplifting effect, causing more of a “high” feeling.

Cannabis hybrids are the result of crossbreeding of sativa and indica plants, providing the wide diversity available in cannabis strains today.

- **Endocannabinoid system**

A network of chemical signals and cellular receptors throughout the human body that help regulate the central nervous and other systems. Both THC and CBD can act on the cannabinoid receptors all over the body but with different effects.

- **Endocannabinoids**
Cannabinoids produced by the body.
- **Phytocannabinoids**
Cannabinoids produced by the cannabis plant.
- **Synthetic cannabinoids**
Chemically produced cannabinoids that are not sourced from the cannabis plant. Primarily known as K2, Spice, Bath Salts, and synthetic marijuana, these products can be unpredictable, harmful, and potentially life-threatening. They are illegal in Washington State.
- **The “Entourage Effect”**
The theory that combining THC with other cannabis compounds, i.e., CBD and terpenes, has a modulating effect and can minimize the psychoactive effects of THC. More research is needed to better understand the combinations and percentage levels that will produce the most desirable effects.
- **Hemp**
The same plant as cannabis but specific cultivars (strains) that are grown to meet a legal definition of having less than 0.3% THC.

Types of products

Cannabis can be consumed, inhaled, or applied to the skin. The method of use and THC content will have an impact on how soon and how intensely the effects will be felt and how long they will last.

- **Inhaled products** – Plant matter and cannabis concentrates that are inhaled either as a cigarette-like product or concentrate product. These include:
 - Loose flower - Rolled into a cigarette-like shape (joint), placed into an emptied cigar (blunt), or put in a pipe or water pipe (bong or bowl). Can also be used in a dried flower vaping device.
 - “Pre-roll” – Loose flower already rolled into a cigarette-like shape using rolling papers. A cannabis concentrate is sometimes added to a pre-roll, significantly increasing the THC content.
 - Concentrates – Placed in and inhaled from a smoking or vaping device. Includes products known as dabs, shatter, wax, and budder.
- **Consumable products** – Cannabis oils, extracts, or plant matter combined with various food products for ingestion. These are produced in various forms:
 - Edibles – Cannabis infused food and cannabis infused beverages.
 - Capsules and tablets.

- Tinctures – Cannabis infused liquids that are placed under the tongue with a dropper or syringe.
- **Topicals** – Applied to the skin and include lotions, ointments, balms, transdermal patches, and suppositories.

Reading a product label

In addition to the business information for the cannabis producer or processor, labels on cannabis packaging are required to have specific information so you, as a consumer, can make an informed decision regarding a purchase.

Total THC and other cannabinoids

Different products have different amounts of cannabinoids. The amount of these compounds can determine how a product will affect you, especially the THC concentration.

- Edibles (like gummies, chocolates, and drinks) list the amount of THC per serving or unit and per package in milligrams (mg). These products may contain no more than 10 mg of THC per serving or unit, and 100 mg per package.
- Inhalable products, like pre-rolls, flower, and concentrates, list cannabinoid content as a percentage. Most cannabis flower products will have between 12% and 25% THC. Concentrates generally fall between 60% and 90%, although they can be higher. Keep in mind that the presence of other cannabinoids, terpenes, and flavonoids may impact the effects of THC. Pre-rolls may also have added a concentrate, increasing the percentage.

“Package” means a container that has a single unit or group of units.

“Unit” means an individual consumable item within a package of one or more consumable items in solid, liquid, gas, or any form intended for human consumption.

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Solvents

Some forms of cannabis extractions use solvents, such as ethanol and butane, to produce concentrates. If solvents are used, the type of solvents must be disclosed on the label. This is important because residual solvents in the product can cause health issues. See “Lab testing” below for more information.

Other content information

Depending on the type of product, a complete list of other chemicals, compounds, additives, thickening agents, terpenes, or other substances added must be provided. Edible products must include a list of ingredients and allergens.

Warnings

Cannabis use is not without risks. Specific statements about health risks, a reminder that products are legal only for those 21 and older, and a caution to keep products out of the reach of children are required for cannabis product labels.

Some warnings are required on all product labels, and some are for certain types of products:

- Warning – may be habit forming
- Unlawful outside Washington State
- It is illegal to operate a motor vehicle under the influence of cannabis
- Smoking is hazardous to your health (for inhaled products)
- “DO NOT EAT” in bold, capital letters (topicals)
- Caution: Intoxicating effects may be delayed by 2+ hours

The “Not For Kids” symbol is required on the label and contains the Poison Center number, (800) 222-1222. This is the number to call in case you or someone else is not feeling well after using the product or if the product is consumed by mistake.

Universal Symbol

You will see this symbol on all legal (i.e., regulated) adult-use cannabis products. This symbol allows you to quickly know if a product contains THC.

Note: Some illegal producers of cannabis have also placed this symbol on their packaging, making it appear it comes from a state licensed facility. To determine if the product was legally produced, consider other indicators, such as where it is sold and whether the THC concentration in the product is within the state’s legal limits. (See section titled, “Is it legal? How to know.”)

Optional information

“Best by” date, harvest date, and manufactured date are all optional for cannabis packaging and labeling.

Required accompanying information

The producer or processor must provide the following product-specific information, for as long as the product is for sale, through an internet link, web address, or QR code on the product label:

- A statement disclosing all pesticides applied to the plants during production of useable cannabis or the cannabis used in the extraction process to create a concentrate or infused product.
- A list disclosing all chemicals, compounds, additives, thickening agents, terpenes, or other substances added to any cannabis concentrate during or after production.

Quality Assurance Information

Upon request – A consumer may request the name of the certified lab and quality assurance test results for any cannabis or cannabis product. The Certificate of Analysis, or COA, will tell you the results of testing for harmful contaminants as well as which specific cannabinoids are present in a product.

Cannabis can change when it is exposed to air or other contaminants, so your COA will not be accurate forever.

See “Understanding test results” for information on how to read the COA.

Understanding test results

Before a licensed retailer can sell a cannabis product to a consumer, the product must be tested by a certified cannabis laboratory to make sure it is safe to consume. Certain items are harmful to consume and, by testing the product, the risk to public health is limited.

As a consumer, you have the right to ask the retailer to provide the testing results for a product you want to purchase. It is called a Certificate of Analysis, or COA. This information can help you make an informed choice.

All products receive the testing shown in the chart. Medically compliant products are also tested for heavy metals, and they must be free of all pesticides.

This chart explains what tests are required and why they are important. An action limit is defined as the percentage of a substance at which it may pose a health hazard, and therefore action must be taken to eliminate the health risk.

Test	WHY
Water activity	Ensures the product's moisture level is not susceptible to mold
Potency analysis	Provides THC and CBD potency
Foreign matter inspection	Ensures that the product does not have large stems, seeds, or non-plant-based matter (e.g., insect fragment, hair, etc.) above the action limits
Microbiological screening	Ensures the product does not have bacteria such as E. Coli or Salmonella above the action limits
Mycotoxin screening	Ensures the product does not have harmful molds or fungi above the action limits
Pesticide screening	Ensures that if any pesticides were used, they are below the action limits
Residual solvent screening	Ensures that any solvent residue, such as butane and other hydrocarbons, from making a concentrate is below the action limits

Is it a legal product? How to know

For those not familiar with the legal cannabis system, it may be difficult to know whether you are buying a legal product. Here are some things to keep in mind.

Are you buying from a licensed retailer?

There are over 500 licensed cannabis stores across the state. If you aren't sure if a store is licensed by the LCB, you can look at the list of licensed stores on the website under [Frequently Requested Lists](#). Click on Cannabis License Applicants and be sure to check column K, "Privilege Status" to see if the store is active or closed. The status of "Pending (Issued)" is also an Active status. If you are still unsure, you can call the LCB and ask.

Also, cannabis licensees are required to post their license in a conspicuous place. If you don't see it, you can ask about it.

What about online sales?

You can still check the retailer list on the LCB website, referenced above. Stores may not legally sell cannabis online, but they can accept online pick-up orders. An order must be paid for at the store when you come to pick it up.

Legal stores may not ship products nor deliver them to you. If a website is offering shipping or home delivery, it is likely not a legal site.

Hemp-derived and synthetic THC products – Legal?

In 2023, the State Legislature established that only licensed cannabis retailers may sell products with detectable levels of THC to consumers. That means it is illegal for unlicensed stores to sell products with any detectable levels of THC, including hemp-derived and synthetic THC, like delta-8 THC. The law also prohibits K2, Spice, and Bath Salts from being sold.

Products with hemp-derived and synthetic THC had been showing up in convenience stores, smoke shops, and other locations, advertised as containing delta-8 THC, delta-10 THC, THCO, etc. There were no regulations for manufacturing, testing, or labeling the products, and many were sold in packaging that resembled child-friendly products. Concerns about public health as well as the potential effects on the regulated market led to the passage of [Senate Bill 5367](#).

Cannabis Health and Beauty Aid (CHABA) products and products approved by the FDA (hemp seed, hemp seed oil, etc.) are exempt from the license mandate. ([RCW 69.50.575](#))

Why buy legal

Besides it being illegal to purchase cannabis and/or cannabis products from an unlicensed seller, a primary consideration is that buying legal means the cannabis and cannabis products are held to high quality standards. Here are other reasons to purchase cannabis from a licensed retailer:

- Cannabis sold in licenses stores must be tested by a licensed laboratory before it can be sold to the consumer. Tests determine the cannabinoid profile as well as whether there are unacceptable levels of harmful elements, such as pesticides, foreign matter, mycotoxins, and residual solvents.
- Label requirements have been established so you know what you are buying, including the THC concentration of the product, ingredients used in edible products, and any food allergens that may be present. THC levels are verified in the required lab testing. Cannabis obtained from illegal sources is not required to be tested or accurately labeled. Other substances (which may be harmful) may be added without the consumer's knowledge, which affect the integrity of the product and can result in false and misleading labeling.
- Production, processing, and retail standards are established to protect workers and consumers.
- Packaging may not be child-resistant, increasing the likelihood of accidental ingestion by children or pets.
- Tax revenues from licenses businesses fund a wide range of services and programs, including Basic Health funds, cannabis research, substance misuse prevention, reduction, treatment and education programs, and local governments, to name a few.
- The regulated industry provides a wealth of jobs within the state.

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