My patient uses medical cannabis… now what?

A practical conversation for Minnesota nurses.

OBJECTIVES

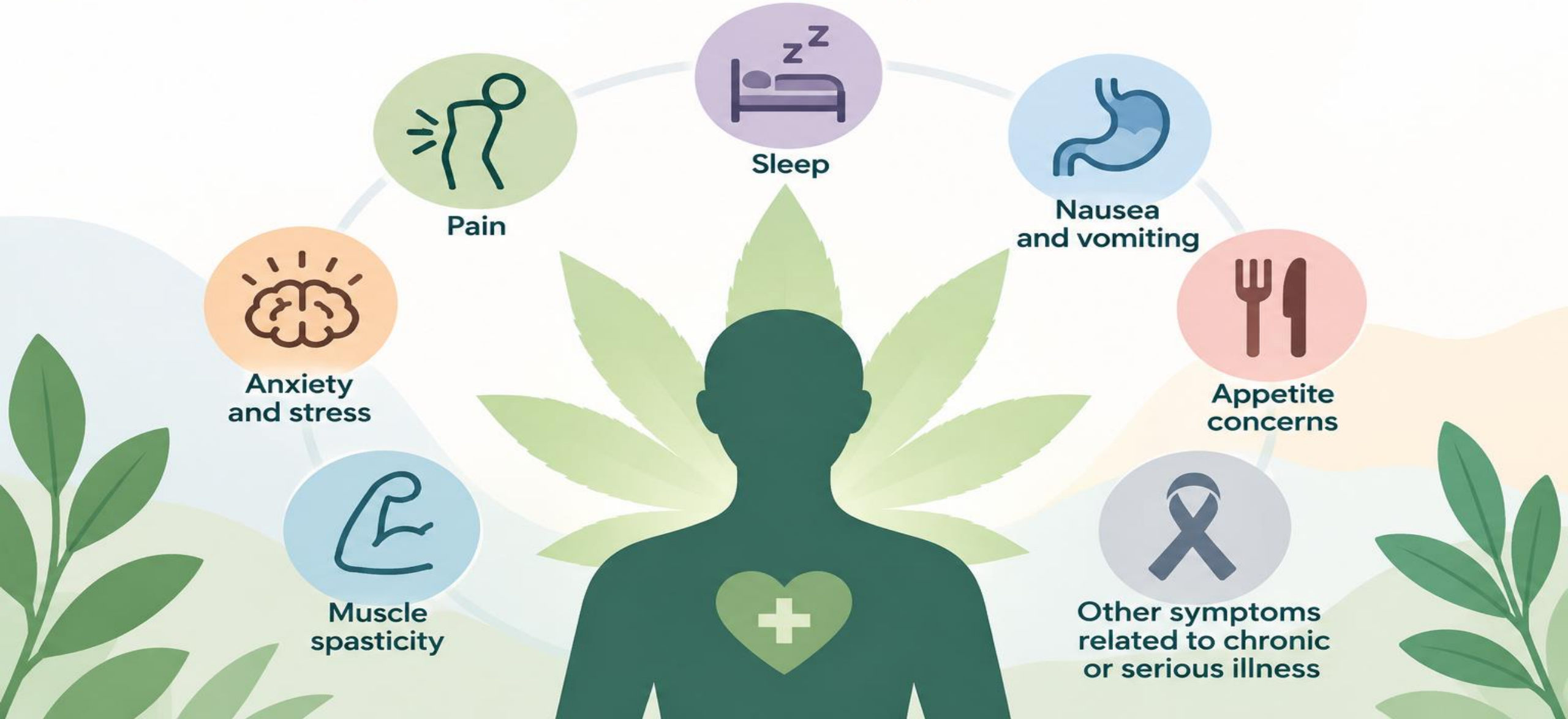
1) Describe the basic principles of medical cannabis, including common cannabis, components routes of administration, and of the Minnesota medical cannabis program.

2) Identify the key nursing considerations when caring for a patient who uses medical cannabis, including assessment, safety education, documentation, and communication within the nurse's role.

3) Apply a practical approach to initiating conversation with patients about medical cannabis and identify reliable resources for navigating questions about cannabis use regulations and facility policies.

Why This Conversation Matters?

Patients may use cannabis
as part of managing their health.



Nurses may have questions about safety, policies, and their role.

A nonjudgmental conversation helps us understand the patient's *needs* and *goals*.

Needs

What symptoms are they hoping to manage?

Goals

What do they hope to feel, do, or improve?

What do you think?

I want your perspective.

1. How many have encountered cannabis use in your healthcare setting?

2. How comfortable do you feel discussing cannabis with patients?

3. Can you share what you know about your facility's policies?

4. What questions do patients ask you as a nurse about cannabis?

How Minnesota’s Medical Cannabis Program Works

1

Qualifying condition

The patient has a condition that meets Minnesota’s program requirements.

2

Practitioner certification

A qualified healthcare practitioner certifies the patient’s qualifying condition.

3

Patient enrollment

The patient completes the applicable registration requirements.

4

Obtain cannabis products

The patient accesses products through an authorized Minnesota source under the program’s current rules.

Note: Veterans may use an alternative certification pathway.

Cannabis is a plant

that contains naturally occurring compounds called **cannabinoids.**

Key Cannabinoids

THC

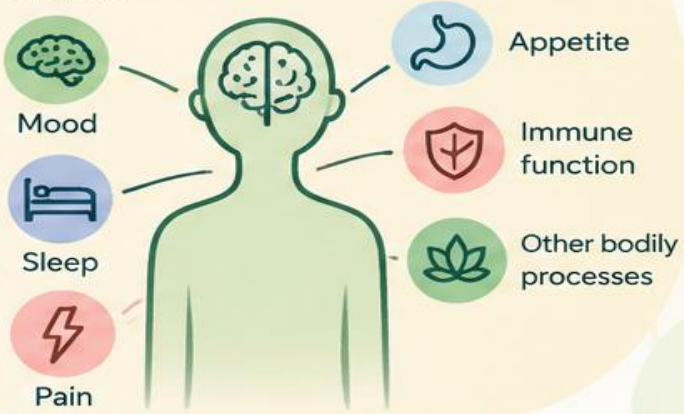
- Can cause **intoxicating** effects.
- May affect perception, coordination, and cognition.

CBD

- Does not typically cause intoxicating effects.
- Can still affect the body and interact with medications.

How It Works

Cannabinoids interact with the body's **endocannabinoid system**, which helps regulate functions such as:



Forms of Use

Cannabis products come in different forms, including:

- **Inhaled** (smoked or vaporized)
- **Oral** (edibles)
- **Sublingual** (oils/tinctures)
- **Topical** (creams, lotions, patches)

Effects Can Vary

The effects of cannabis depend on:

- **Product** (THC/CBD ratio)
- **Dose**
- **Route** of use
- **Individual** factors

Why Patients Use It

Patients may use cannabis to help manage symptoms such as:

- Pain
- Sleep difficulties
- Anxiety or stress
- Nausea or decreased appetite
- Other chronic or serious health conditions

It's important for nurses to understand its potential effects, consider safety and medication interactions, and approach the conversation without judgment.

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis is a plant that contains naturally occurring compounds called **cannabinoids.**

It is a natural plant with many different compounds.

The two most discussed cannabinoids are **THC** and **CBD**.

These compounds interact with the body's endocannabinoid system, which helps regulate many functions such as mood, sleep, appetite, and pain.

THC vs. CBD

Both are naturally occurring cannabinoids found in the cannabis plant, but they have different effects.

THC

Tetrahydrocannabinol

Psychoactive

- Can cause intoxicating effects ("feeling high").
- May affect perception, coordination, reaction time, and cognition.
- May help with pain, nausea, appetite stimulation, and other symptoms.
- Potential side effects include impaired memory, anxiety, dry mouth, and increased heart rate.

CBD

Cannabidiol

Non-intoxicating

- Does not typically cause a "high."
- May have calming, anti-inflammatory, and anti-anxiety properties.
- Can still interact with medications (e.g., blood thinners, seizure medications, and others).
- Generally well tolerated, but possible side effects include diarrhea, changes in appetite, and fatigue.

Forms of Cannabis Use

Cannabis products come in different forms, and the onset, duration, and intensity of effects can vary depending on the product and route of use.

Inhaled
(Smoking or Vaporizing)

- Dried flower smoked or vaporized.
- Effects are felt quickly.
- Common methods: joint, pipe, bong, vaporizer.

Onset: Minutes

Duration: 1–4 hours

Oral
(Edibles, Capsules, Beverages)

- Swallowed and absorbed through the digestive system.
- Slower onset but longer duration.
- Examples: gummies, chocolates, capsules, beverages.

Onset: 30–120 minutes

Duration: 4–8+ hours

Sublingual
(Tinctures, Oils, Sprays)

- Placed under the tongue and absorbed through the oral mucosa.
- Faster onset than edibles.
- Examples: tinctures, oils, sprays, dissolvable tablets or strips.

Onset: 15–45 minutes

Duration: 2–6 hours

Topical
(Creams, Lotions, Patches)

- Applied to the skin.
- Primarily used for localized relief (e.g., pain, inflammation).
- Does not typically produce intoxicating effects.
- Examples: creams, lotions, balms, transdermal patches.

Onset: Minutes–Hours

Duration: Variable

Other Forms

- Rectal or vaginal suppositories.
- Lozenges or dissolvable films.
- Products used in research or specific medical situations.

Onset: Variable

Duration: Variable

The form of cannabis, dose, and route of administration can affect how quickly it works, how long the effects last, and the overall experience.

Effects Can Vary

Cannabis can affect people differently. The type of product, your body, and the situation all play a role in how it works and how you feel.

Desired Effects

Patients may use cannabis to help manage symptoms such as:

- Pain
- Nausea and vomiting
- Appetite changes
- Anxiety or stress
- Sleep difficulties
- Muscle spasticity
- Other condition-specific symptoms

Potential Side Effects

Side effects depend on the product, dose, and individual. They may include:

- Changes in mood (euphoria, anxiety)
- Drowsiness or sedation
- Impaired coordination and reaction time
- Changes in attention, memory, or judgment
- Dry mouth
- Increased heart rate
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Nausea

Intensity and Duration

Effects can vary in how strong they feel and how long they last.

Even with the same product, two people may have very different experiences.

Individual Factors

How cannabis affects someone can depend on:

- Body chemistry and genetics
- Tolerance and past experience
- Age
- Body weight and metabolism
- Medical conditions (e.g., mental health, heart conditions, respiratory conditions)
- Other medications or substances (e.g., alcohol)

Product Variability

Products can differ in their cannabinoid content and other compounds (such as terpenes), which may influence effects.

- Different THC/CBD ratios
- Varied formulations and concentrations
- Other plant compounds (e.g., terpenes)

Setting and Mindset

The environment and mindset (often referred to as "set and setting") can influence the experience.

- Feeling safe and comfortable
- Level of stress or anxiety
- Social environment
- Reason for use (recreational vs. medical)
- Expectations and prior experience

Key Takeaway:

There is no single, predictable effect.

Cannabis affects each person differently. It's important to take a patient-centered approach, ask about their experience, and consider all the factors that may influence their response.

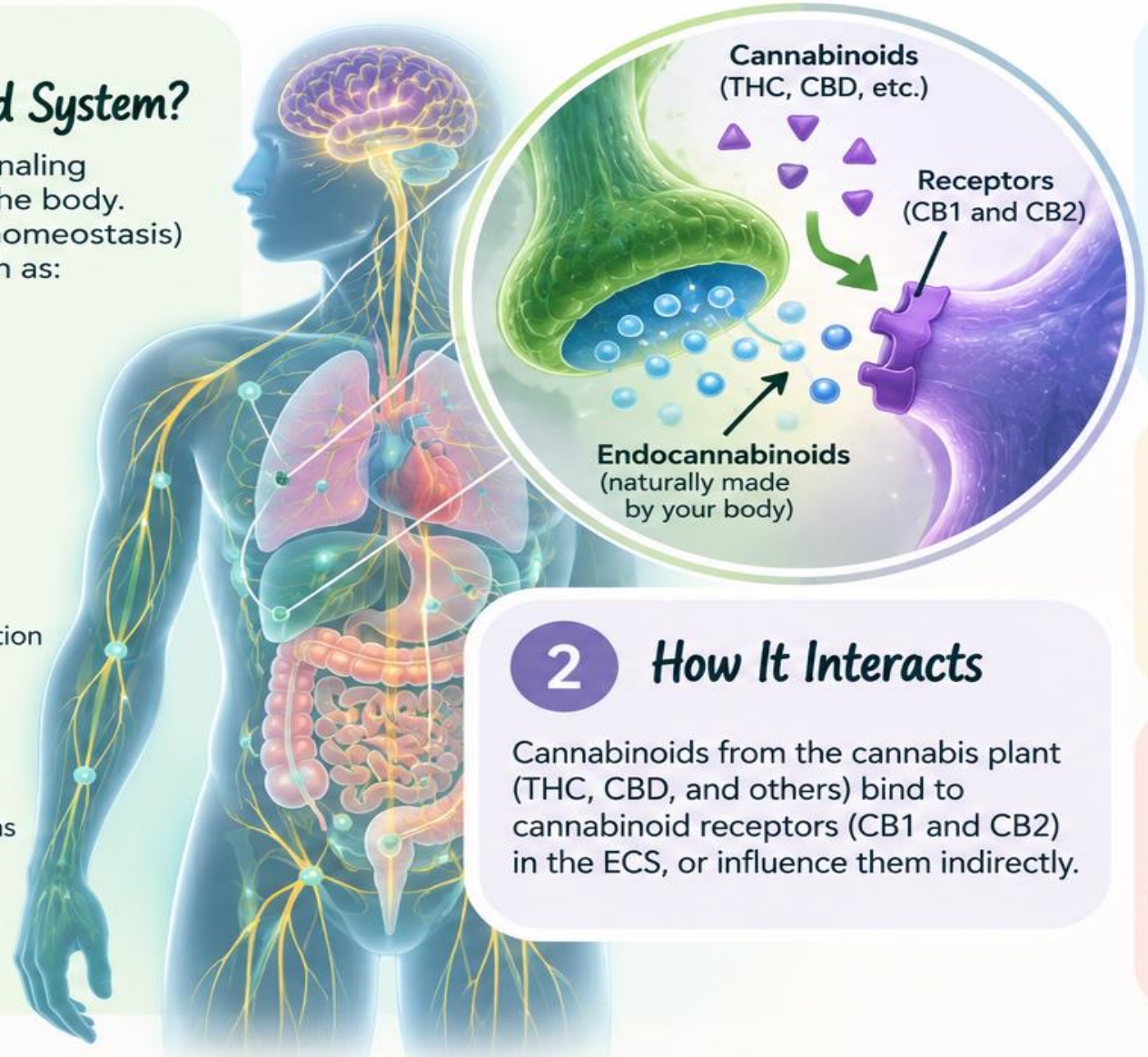
How Cannabis Works

Cannabis compounds interact with the body's endocannabinoid system (ECS), which helps regulate many important functions.

1 What is the Endocannabinoid System?

The ECS is a natural cell-signaling system found throughout the body. It helps maintain balance (homeostasis) by regulating functions such as:

- Mood and stress response
- Pain perception
- Immune function
- Appetite and digestion
- Sleep
- Other body functions (e.g., inflammation, memory, and more)



2 How It Interacts

Cannabinoids from the cannabis plant (THC, CBD, and others) bind to cannabinoid receptors (CB1 and CB2) in the ECS, or influence them indirectly.

3 Where the Receptors Are

CB1 receptors are found mainly in the brain and central nervous system, which helps explain the potential effects on mood, perception, and pain.

CB2 receptors are found mostly in the immune system and peripheral tissues, which may influence inflammation, immune response, and pain.

4 The Result

By interacting with the ECS, cannabis can help influence the body's natural processes, which may lead to changes in how a person feels, such as relief from pain, reduced nausea, improved sleep, or decreased anxiety.

5 Key Takeaway

Cannabis works by interacting with the body's endocannabinoid system, a natural system that helps keep the body in balance. This is why it can have effects on many different functions, and why people may experience different benefits.

Why Cannabis Works

Cannabis can be helpful because it works with the body's natural endocannabinoid system (ECS) to support balance and regulate many important functions.

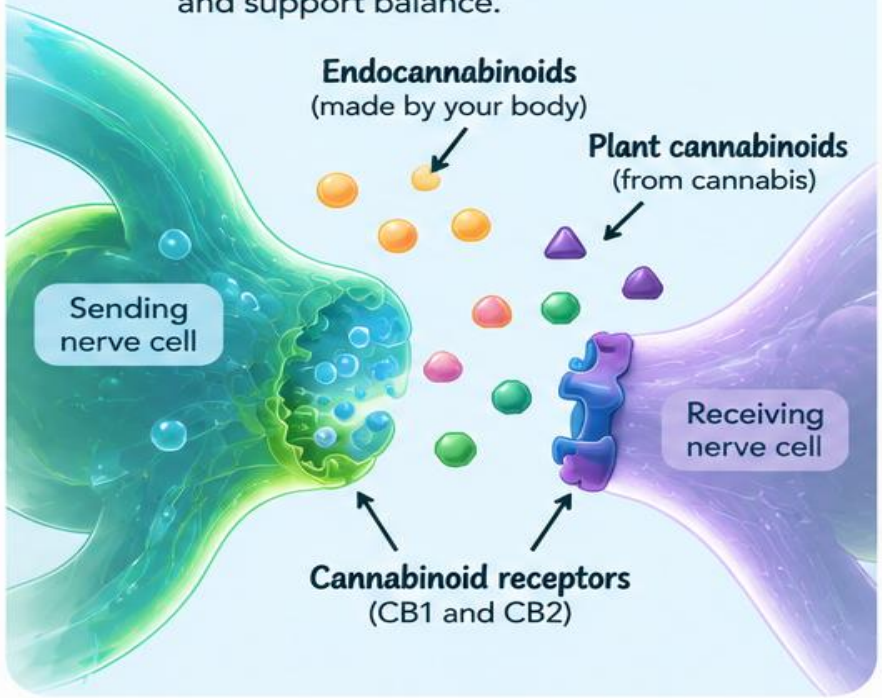
1 The Endocannabinoid System (ECS)

The ECS is a natural cell-signaling system found throughout the body. It helps maintain balance (homeostasis) by regulating processes such as:

- Mood and stress response
- Pain perception
- Immune function and inflammation
- Appetite and digestion
- Sleep
- Other functions (e.g., memory, learning, and reproduction)

2 Cannabinoids Fit the System

Cannabis contains plant compounds called cannabinoids (like THC and CBD) that can bind to or influence cannabinoid receptors in the ECS, helping to regulate signaling and support balance.



3 Two Main Receptors

Cannabinoids primarily interact with CB1 and CB2 receptors, which are found in different areas of the body.

CB1 Receptors

- Found mainly in the brain and central nervous system
- Involved in mood, memory, perception, appetite, and pain

CB2 Receptors

- Found mainly in the immune system and peripheral tissues
- Involved in inflammation, immune response, and pain

4 How This Can Help

By interacting with the ECS, cannabinoids may help the body restore balance, which can lead to symptom relief for a variety of conditions, such as:

- Pain
- Anxiety and stress
- Nausea
- Sleep difficulties
- Inflammation

5 Key Takeaway

Cannabis works because it interacts with a natural system in the body that helps maintain balance. This interaction can influence many functions, which is why it may be effective for a wide range of symptoms and conditions.

When a patient uses medical cannabis, what should nurses assess?

For Patients Using Medical Cannabis, What Should Nurses Assess?

Comprehensive Health History

Perform a systems assessment and obtain a thorough health history.

Past Treatments

Review previous treatments for the condition and response to therapy.

Comorbidities

Assess for coexisting medical conditions.

Previous Cannabis Experience

Ask about prior use, effects, and any concerns or adverse reactions.

Medication & Supplement Reconciliation

Review all current prescription and over-the-counter medications and supplements for potential interactions.

Food & Medication Allergies

Identify any known allergies or sensitivities.

Physical Assessment

Complete a focused physical assessment relevant to the patient's condition and cannabis use.

Risk for Substance Use Disorder & Psychiatric Disorders

Assess for history or risk of substance use disorder and psychiatric conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, psychosis)

Nurses Scope and Responsibilities

Understand the Basics

Have a general understanding of the endocannabinoid system, receptors, cannabinoids and the interactions between them.

Understand Pharmacology and Evidence

Understand cannabis pharmacology and the research associated with the use of medical cannabis.

Communicate and Document

Communicate the findings of the clinical encounter to other health care providers and note such communication in the medical record.

Identify Safety Considerations

Identify the safety considerations for the client use of medical cannabis.

Know Minnesota State Law

Have a working knowledge of the current state of legislation of medical cannabis in Minnesota.

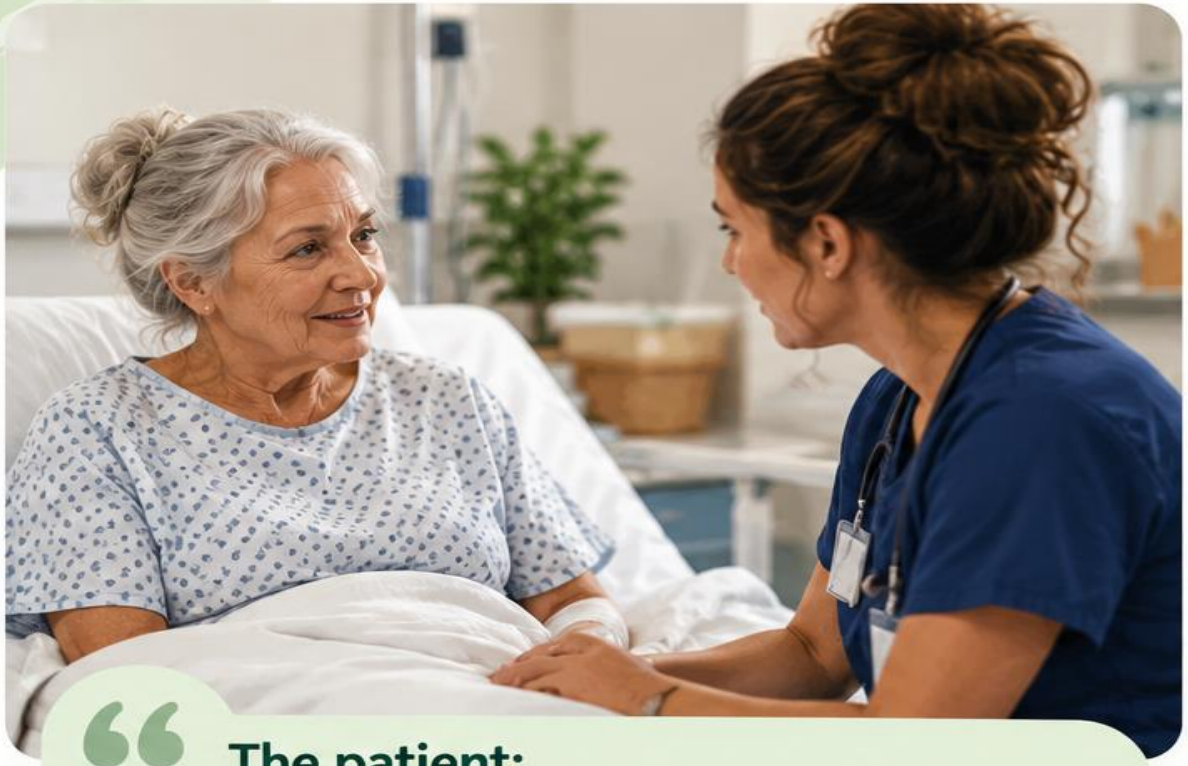
How to Start a Conversation

Lead with curiosity, not judgment.

Scenario 1

It Really Helps Me

A patient shares that medical cannabis is helpful.



The patient:
"I use medical cannabis for my chronic pain, and it's the only thing that helps me sleep."

Discussion Questions

- How would you respond?
- What would you want to learn about the patient's use and experience?
- What safety considerations would you assess?

Example Opening Response

"I'm glad you're telling me about that. Can you share what benefits you've noticed and how you use it?"

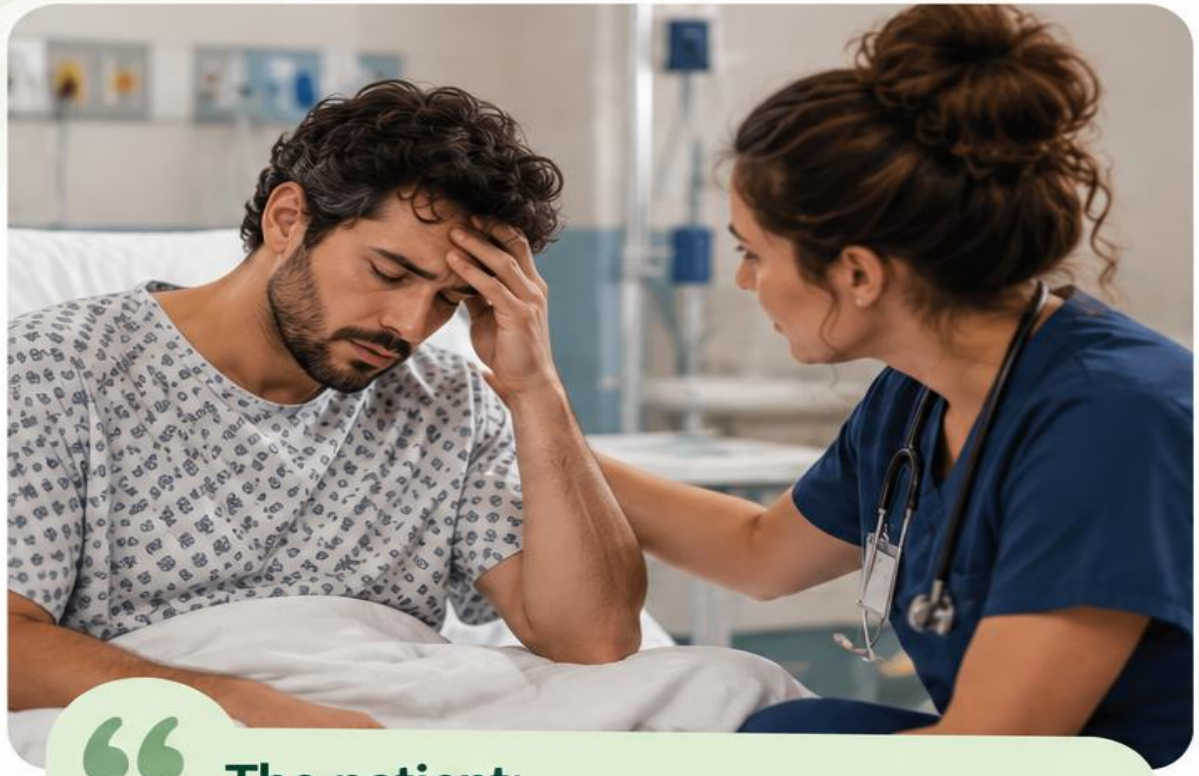
Key Assessment Points

- Reason for use (symptom management)
- Type of product, dose, route, and frequency
- Perceived benefits and effectiveness
- Other treatments tried
- Potential interactions with medications and supplements
- Overall safety and impact on functioning

Scenario 2

I Don't Feel Right

A patient is experiencing unwanted effects after using cannabis.



The patient:

"I used cannabis earlier, and now I feel dizzy and unusually anxious."

Discussion Questions

- What is your first priority?
- What would you assess?
- What additional questions would you ask about their cannabis use?
- Who might need to be notified or involved in their care?

Example Opening Response

"I'm glad you told me. Let's make sure you're safe. Can you tell me what you used, when you used it, and how you're feeling now?"

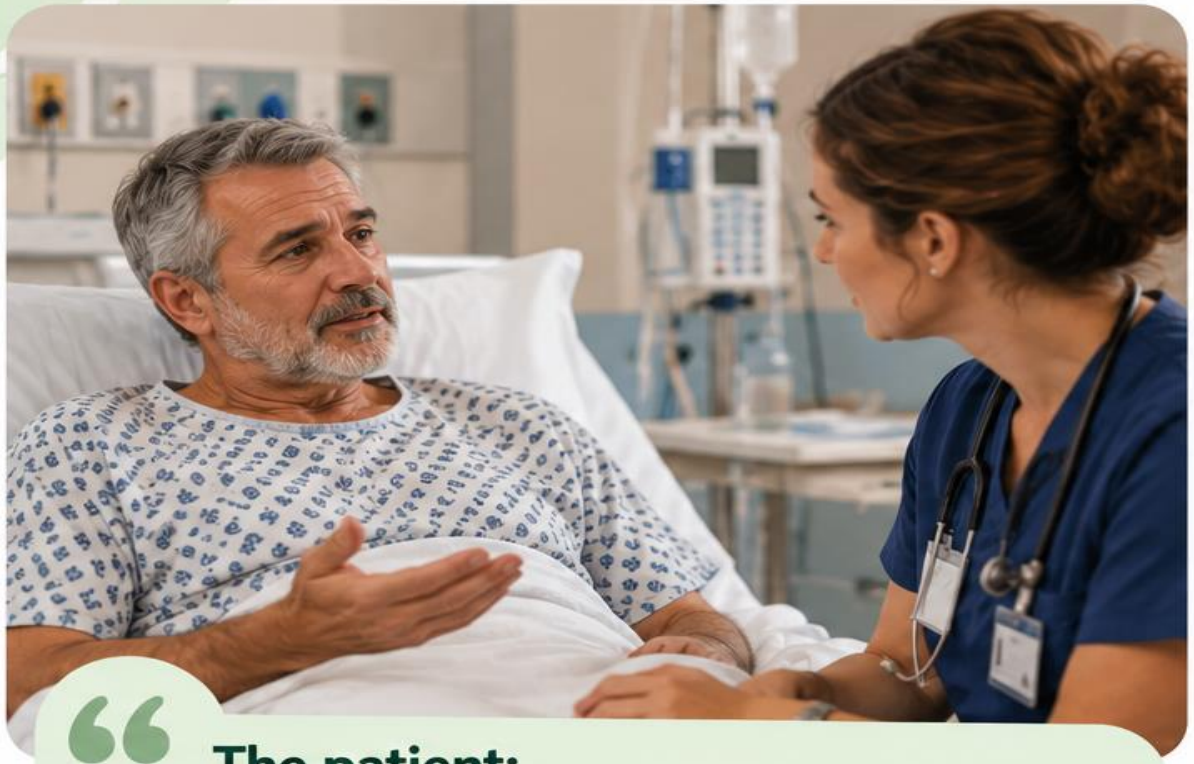
Key Assessment Points

- Type of product, dose, route, and timing of use
- Current symptoms (e.g., dizziness, anxiety, nausea, changes in perception)
- Vital signs and mental status
- Fall risk and safety
- Potential interactions with medications or other substances
- Need for further evaluation or notification of the provider

Scenario 3

Can I Use It in the Hospital?

A patient asks if they can use medical cannabis during their hospital stay.



The patient:

"I use medical cannabis at home. Can I use it while I'm here in the hospital?"

Discussion Questions

- How would you respond?
- What additional information would you want to know about the patient's use?
- What policy or guidance would you need to check?
- Who should be involved in the discussion?

Example Opening Response

"That's a good question. I want to understand your usual use and check what our hospital policy and applicable Minnesota requirements allow. Can you tell me more about how you use it at home?"

Key Assessment Points

- Reason for use and perceived benefits
- Type of product, dose, route, and frequency
- Timing of last use
- Review current hospital policy and Minnesota state law
- Safety considerations and interactions with treatments
- Coordinate with the care team (e.g., provider, pharmacy, case management)

MN Resources

Questions?

Medical Cannabis Program

Steps for patients: certification, enrollment, and purchasing.

How to become a patient →

Qualifying medical conditions

Check the current eligibility list and requirements.

View qualifying conditions →

Where patients may use medical cannabis

Minnesota guidance on permitted and restricted locations.

Read use guidance →

Nursing practice guidance

Minnesota Board of Nursing statement and NCSBN guidance.

Open Board guidance →

Official Minnesota patient and nursing resources · Links open from the slide

References

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Minnesota Rules, chapter 9810. (2025). Cannabis.

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Additional patient resources appear on the preceding slide. Links are clickable.