

health

The number of
CBD-infused
products is
growing like,
uh, weeds.



The *WH* Guide to CBD

The new “it” drug is all over your social feed and showing up in mineral water, bath bombs, and lotion. Devotees swear by its health benefits. But does it live up to the hype?

By Ashley Ross
Photographed by Travis Rathbone

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While training for a triathlon back in 2009, Kristen Brooks flew over her handlebars. For years afterward, she couldn't run, ski, or hike without neck or back pain. Cortisone shots and acupuncture didn't provide relief, so when the now 41-year-old's best friend said she was going to try a topical cream containing cannabidiol—CBD, a compound found in marijuana—to ease her own aches, Brooks figured: *Why not join her?* Within two months, her discomfort was gone. “It felt like witchcraft,” she says.

Voodoo it's not. But CBD has some seemingly powerful mojo. Unlike THC—the psychoactive component in a classic joint or weed brownie—it won't get you high. Yet it may help regulate mood and chronic pain and reduce inflammation.

“CBD is an extraordinary compound,” says Sanford Wolgel, PhD, former chief science officer at Cannabistry Labs. There's strong evidence it can dial down anxiety—makes sense, since CBD seems to increase levels of your body's natural mood-regulating compounds. A CBD-based epilepsy medication was approved by the FDA in late June, and CBD has been found to curtail inflammation in mice. But that's all science has proved. “The research on CBD is very early,” notes Jordan Tishler, MD, a Harvard-trained doc who is an

expert on using cannabis as medical treatment. Experts suspect some of the reported feel-good perks come down to the placebo effect (or clever marketing). Renee Beck, a 34-year-old who uses a CBD lotion on her feet after her half-marathon training runs, hears that. “I'm probably feeling the cooling effect more than the CBD,” she says. Still, it seems to make the pain from her foot injury more manageable, so she uses it—along with physical therapy exercises—to keep her aches in check.

Buyer Beware

CBD is no magic pill (or oil or edible or, well, you get the picture). But if you want to see if it can take the edge off your anxiety or reduce post-workout aches, you'll have to put in some effort to find an effective product.

Reefer retail has no regulator. “It's like the Wild West out there,” says Marcel Bonn-Miller, PhD, a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine who studies cannabis. In 2017 he tested 84 CBD products and found 26 percent contained less CBD than they claimed to, while 43 percent had more. The latter might sound scary, but high levels aren't known to be dangerous. Too little, however, can make a product ineffective. (Oh, and 21 percent of the CBD products also contained THC, which can make you high and show up on

drug tests.) Bonn-Miller also warns that some CBD products could include traces of toxic chemicals such as pesticides and heavy metals like lead or arsenic.

You can try to avoid fraud and dangerous chemicals by asking the companies you're buying from for their testing reports (third-party lab reviews that note the CBD percentage and any harmful toxins), says Sam Kamin, PhD, a professor of marijuana law and policy at the University of Denver.

Check out a product's other ingredients too, says Joel Greengrass, CEO of Theramu, a company that makes CBD oils and creams. Look for emu oil or refined coconut oil; they can penetrate your skin and deliver CBD to aching muscles. Olive oil can't do this, so products made with it are basically just very good moisturizers, says Greengrass.

Topical and edible CBD wares have been researched more than stuff like vaginal suppositories that claim to ease cramps (yes, those products really do exist!), so you're better off sticking to stuff you can swallow or slather on your skin, says Bonn-Miller. And if you take other medications, make sure that you mention your new CBD habit to your doctor. CBD can interact with certain drugs, including benzodiazepines and antidepressants, says Jeff Chen, MD, director of the UCLA Cannabis Research Initiative.

2.1 billion dollars

The estimated expected worth of the fledgling CBD industry by 2020



So, how legal is this stuff?

CBD is illegal on a federal level, even if you live in a state where recreational or medical marijuana is allowed. But the likelihood of the law coming after you for buying a CBD-spiked coffee or ordering a CBD cream online is low. “Technically, possessing CBD products is a federal misdemeanor—but I'm not aware of anyone who's been charged,” says Mark A.R. Kleiman, PhD, a professor of public policy at New York University Marron Institute of Urban Management.



My doc gave me an Rx for CBD. What does that mean?

Physicians can't actually write a prescription for CBD (because of that whole not-being-legal thing), but they can recommend you take it. Some may even advise you on a dose or brand to look for. You can't get CBD at a pharmacy, and it isn't covered by insurance, but some insurers let you pay for it with your health savings account (HSA).



I bought a CBD cream that's "hemp-based." What's up with that?

Hemp is a cannabis plant that has very low levels of THC (no more than 0.3 percent) but still contains CBD. Manufacturers like to distinguish between the two because cannabis sometimes sounds sketchier, in a legal sense, than hemp, but there's no difference between them in the CBD effect.