Medical Marijuana, Part 1: What You Should Know About CBD

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For several years now I have been getting the same questions from two very different groups of people. Christian laypeople ask me whether the CBD gummies at the pharmacy checkout are safe, whether they work, and whether a believer should be taking them at all. Christian physicians ask me what to tell those same patients. I have answered these questions one at a time, in columns and in conversations, but I have never put the whole picture in one place. This is the first of five posts that try to do that.

Here is the plan. This post covers CBD, the non-intoxicating cannabis compound that has become a wellness industry. The next two cover THC and what is called "medical marijuana": what it is, what the law now says, what the evidence shows, what it does to the body, and who should never use it. The fourth post takes up the question most of my readers are really asking, which is whether a follower of Jesus can use these products with a clear conscience. The fifth is written for my Christian physician colleagues who are deciding whether and how to recommend them.

A word about what I am not doing. I am not writing a case for legalization or a case against it. I am not going to tell you that everyone who uses cannabis is sinning, and I am not going to tell you it is harmless. My aim is the same one I have had for more than forty years of practice: to give you accurate information, to tell you honestly where the evidence is thin, and to help you make a wise decision before God with your own physician and pharmacist.

So let's start with CBD.

What CBD is (and isn't)

Cannabidiol, or CBD, is one of more than a hundred compounds called cannabinoids found in the plant *Cannabis sativa*. The two best known are CBD and delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC. THC is the compound that makes people high. CBD, taken by itself, does not.

Hemp and marijuana are both *Cannabis sativa*. The legal difference has been the THC content. Under the 2018 Farm Bill, hemp was defined as cannabis with no more than 0.3 percent THC, and hemp-derived CBD was not a controlled substance. That definition is about to change, and I will come back to it below, because it matters for what you will find on store shelves this winter.

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Most CBD products sold in the United States are extracted from hemp. That does not mean they are THC-free. "Full-spectrum" products contain the plant's other cannabinoids, including small amounts of THC. "Broad-spectrum" products have had the THC removed to undetectable levels. "Isolate" products are CBD alone. Keep those three terms in mind. They matter both medically and legally.

Why so many people are taking it

One recent estimate is that about one in five American adults used CBD in the past year, most often for anxiety or stress, for sleep, or for chronic pain. You can buy it as oils, capsules, gummies, drinks, creams, salves, patches, and treats for your dog.

The reason for all this is not a flood of new evidence. It is a flood of new marketing. Which brings us to the question that matters most.

What CBD has actually been proven to do

One thing. A prescription form of purified CBD called Epidiolex is FDA-approved to treat seizures in three rare and severe forms of epilepsy: Lennox-Gastaut syndrome, Dravet syndrome, and tuberous sclerosis complex. That approval was earned the hard way, through randomized controlled trials, and the doses are large, up to 25 milligrams per kilogram of body weight per day. A child taking it is under close medical supervision, with liver blood tests before and during treatment.

That is the whole list. For everything else, the honest answer is "not yet proven."

The independent pharmacists at NatMed (formerly the Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database), which is the reference I trust most on herbs and supplements, conclude there is insufficient reliable evidence to rate CBD as even "possibly effective" for anxiety, insomnia, chronic pain, neuropathy, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, PTSD, or most of the other conditions people are buying it for. ConsumerLab, which independently tests supplements, puts it this way: preliminary evidence suggests CBD may help with anxiety, schizophrenia, and a few other conditions, but most of those studies used hundreds of milligrams a day, far more than most products deliver. CBD applied to the skin may modestly reduce some kinds of pain.

"Preliminary" and "may" are doing a lot of work in those sentences. That does not mean CBD does nothing for the neighbor who tells you it helps her sleep. It means we do not yet have the kind of evidence that would let me, as a physician, tell you it will help you.

What it can do to you

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CBD is generally well tolerated at the doses found in consumer products, and NatMed rates it "possibly safe" when taken by mouth appropriately by adults. Note the word "possibly." They do not give it their "likely safe" rating.

The common side effects, which show up more at higher doses, are sleepiness, diarrhea, decreased appetite, dry mouth, and fatigue. Serious harms have been rare.

But one study published last year should change how casually people take this stuff. In 2025, researchers at the FDA ran a randomized, placebo-controlled trial of daily CBD in about 200 healthy adults. The dose, 5 milligrams per kilogram per day, or roughly 340 milligrams for a 150-pound person, was chosen to reflect what consumers actually take from over-the-counter products. After four weeks, 5.6 percent of the people taking CBD had liver enzyme elevations more than three times the upper limit of normal. No one in the placebo group did. The elevations resolved when the CBD was stopped, and none of the participants felt a thing. That last point is what worries me. Your liver does not send a memo.

The second thing to know is that CBD is broken down by the same liver enzyme systems (the cytochrome P450 family, especially CYP3A4 and CYP2C19, along with the UGT enzymes) that handle a great many prescription drugs. CBD can slow the breakdown of certain blood thinners, seizure medicines, antidepressants, and other medications, raising their levels in your blood. These interactions are real, they are poorly studied, and almost no one buying a gummy at the gas station has been told about them. If you take any prescription medication, run CBD through an interaction checker with your pharmacist before you start.

What is actually in the bottle

Here is the part that troubles me most as a physician. Because the FDA has never regulated CBD products the way it regulates drugs or dietary supplements, nobody is checking that what is on the label is what is in the bottle. Independent researchers have been checking, and the results are consistent.

In 2020 the FDA itself sampled 200 CBD products. Of those tested for cannabinoids, about half contained THC. Among products that listed a specific amount of CBD, 18 percent contained significantly less than claimed and 37 percent contained significantly more.

A 2022 study from the University of Kentucky tested 80 hemp-derived CBD oils. THC was detected in 52 of them. Of the 21 products labeled "THC-free," 5 contained measurable THC.

In 2025 the same Kentucky group tested 56 nationally sold CBD gummy products. Seventy percent contained CBD amounts that differed significantly from the label. Thirty-nine percent contained THC. The CBD content even varied from one gummy to the next inside the same bottle.

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The one bright spot is that reputable brands can pass. In ConsumerLab's most recent independent tests, every product they purchased contained its claimed amount of CBD, and most had no detectable THC. But the amount of CBD per serving ranged from under 6 milligrams to over 240, and the cost to get the same amount of CBD varied more than tenfold between brands. That is why I keep telling people the same thing: if you are going to use it, buy a brand that publishes third-party lab results, or use a service like ConsumerLab that does the testing for you.

The rules are changing this fall

Two things are happening in Washington that will affect what you can buy.

First, the FDA's official position has not changed. CBD cannot legally be sold as a dietary supplement or added to food. In practice the agency has mostly gone after companies making disease claims or selling products that look like children's candy. In April 2026 the FDA announced a narrow exception for certain CBD products supplied to Medicare patients through a pilot program, and a broader FDA compliance and enforcement policy for CBD has been under White House review since March. The gray zone is still gray, but it is finally getting attention.

Second, and more important for you, on November 12, 2026, the federal definition of hemp narrows. Congress wrote the change into last year's appropriations act, mainly to shut down the intoxicating "hemp-derived" THC gummies and seltzers that had crept into convenience stores through a loophole. But the new law also caps finished hemp products at 0.4 milligrams of total THC per container. Industry groups estimate that most full-spectrum CBD products on the market today exceed that cap and will no longer qualify as legal hemp. THC-free broad-spectrum and isolate products should remain inside the definition. Several bills are pending in Congress to modify or delay the change, and the President's December 2025 executive order asked federal agencies to work with Congress to preserve access to appropriate CBD products, so this may shift again before or after the deadline. For now, the practical takeaway is simple. If you use a full-spectrum product, talk with your doctor about whether a THC-free product would serve you as well.

One more caution that has not changed. Because so many CBD products contain THC, using them can produce a positive drug test for marijuana. Many employers, the Department of Transportation, and the military treat that as a positive test regardless of what the label said.

A related caution for readers who own or buy firearms. The federal firearms purchase form (ATF Form 4473) asks whether you are an unlawful user of marijuana or any other controlled substance. Hemp-derived CBD that meets the federal definition of hemp is not a controlled substance, so using it does not make you an "unlawful user," and you can answer that question truthfully with a "no." Full-spectrum products that contain meaningful amounts of THC are a different story, and I take that up in Part 2.

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A word to my Christian readers

I will take up the harder questions about cannabis and Christian conscience in the fourth post of this series, because they mostly concern THC. CBD does not get you high, so the Bible's warnings about drunkenness are not the first thing to think about here. The more relevant questions are ones of stewardship and wisdom. Is this safe for a body that is not my own? Have I checked whether it interacts with the medicines I already take? Am I being sold something on the strength of a testimonial rather than evidence? "The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps" (Proverbs 14:15). That is not a prohibition. It is a posture.

The bottom line

- CBD has been proven effective for one thing, rare childhood epilepsy, at prescription doses under medical supervision.
- For everything else, the evidence is preliminary at best.
- It can raise liver enzymes at consumer-level doses without any symptoms, and it interacts with many common prescription drugs.
- Many products do not contain what the label says, and many contain THC.
- Federal rules on hemp products change on November 12, 2026. Expect the shelves to change with them.

If, after all that, you and your physician decide a trial of CBD is reasonable, choose a THC-free product from a brand with published third-party testing, start with a low dose, go up slowly, and ask your doctor whether a liver blood test makes sense, especially if you take other medications or plan to use CBD for more than a few weeks.

Next time: what "medical marijuana" actually is, and what changed in federal law this spring.

This post was medically accurate to the best of my knowledge when written. Laws, regulations, and research on cannabis and CBD are changing quickly. Any decision to try CBD should be made with your personal physician and pharmacist.

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Walt Larimore, MD, has been called one of America’s best known family physicians and has been named in the “Guide to America’s Top Family Doctors,” “The Best Doctors in America,” “Who’s Who in Medicine and Healthcare,” and “Who’s Who in America.” He’s a former Vice President and Physician in Residence at Focus on the Family and the American Life League has named him a “Rock-Solid Pro-Life” awardee. He’s also an award-winning medical journalist and the best-selling author of over 40 books. He and his childhood sweetheart and wife of nearly 50 years, Barb, have two adult children and reside in Decatur, Georgia. You can find Doctor Walt’s health blog at www.DrWalt.com and follow him on Facebook at “DrWalt.com”.

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