



Understanding Legal vs. Illegal Cannabis

THE CANNABIS ACT

The Cannabis Act is a set of laws to control the production, distribution, sale and possession of cannabis across Canada.³ The Cannabis Act is intended to keep cannabis out of the hands of youth, eliminate the illicit market, and protect public health and safety by allowing adults access to quality controlled, legal cannabis.³

Although cannabis is legal, there are still sources of illegal cannabis that pose greater risks to our health.

WHY BUY LEGAL?¹

- Legal cannabis must follow strict standards to prevent contamination from dangerous materials like pesticides, heavy metals and bacteria. Illegal cannabis is not controlled and may contain ingredients that are harmful to our health or substances other than cannabis.
- THC and CBD amounts are tested and limited to ensure our safety. Illegal cannabis may have very high levels of THC, which can have negative effects if we use too much.



Legal product



Illegal product

RECOGNIZING LEGAL CANNABIS PACKAGING²

The following regulations do not apply to cannabis products containing less than 0.3% THC

- 1 Look for the universal THC symbol. Any legal cannabis in Canada containing THC must have this on the package. 
- 2 Health Warnings with a yellow background
- 3 Look for an excise tax stamp to show that it is for legal sale in that province/territory. 
- 4 Plain, solid colour packaging with a bar code
- 5 Total THC and CBD content shown in mg or mg/g
- 6 Product weight/net weight

If the packaging is colourful, uses brand name of a known food/candy, or is visually appealing, it is NOT legal. Remember, plain is best.¹



PURCHASING CANNABIS

Legal and illegal cannabis products can both be purchased in stores and online. Sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference between a legal or illegal source. Here are some helpful clues to identify legal sources:

ONLINE SITE ¹

- Must verify legal age before accessing
- Only ships within province
- Includes provincial address and phone number
- Transaction limit of 30g
- Does not offer referral, sign-up bonuses, or other promotions
- Packaging follows legal guidelines and is child resistant

RETAIL STORE ³

- Displays the retail license or a government issued sign outside of the store verifying legal supply
- Packaging follows legal guidelines and is child resistant
- Transaction limit of 30g

For a list of all authorized cannabis retailers in your province and pictures of unique excise stamps, click [here](#)

RISKS OF ILLEGAL CANNABIS

- Have unpredictable THC amounts or may not be labeled at all
- Higher THC levels than what is regulated, leading to risk of overconsumption or dependency
- Products may be laced with other substances/illegal drugs
- Products may contain dangerous chemicals that are flammable (e.g., butane in dabs) or toxic when heated and inhaled (e.g., vitamin E acetate in vapes)
- Contamination (including risk of exposure to heavy metals, pesticide residues, bacteria or fungi, and other indicators of unsanitary production).¹
- Legal consequences of possession of illegal cannabis regardless of age

HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES

- Avoid or limit use before the age of 25
- If you choose to use cannabis, choose products from a legal source
- Start with a small amount of the cannabis product and wait before taking more to prevent overconsumption

REFERENCES

1. Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis (n.d) CannabisSense: Buy Legal. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/cannabis-regulations-licensed-producers/packaging-labelling-guide-cannabis-products/guide.html>
2. Government of Canada (n.d) Packaging and labelling guide for cannabis products. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/cannabis-regulations-licensed-producers/packaging-labelling-guide-cannabis-products/guide.html>
3. Government of Canada (n.d) Compliance and enforcement policy for the Cannabis Act. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/laws-regulations/compliance-enforcement-policy-cannabis-act/policy.html>