

1. What are “edibles”?

“Edibles” are foods or drinks that contain marijuana. Currently, most medical marijuana dispensaries in California have edibles available for purchase by eligible people. Edibles come in many shapes and types, and can look like regular foods that don’t contain marijuana. Many types of marijuana edibles are made with tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), a type of chemical that is taken from the marijuana plant. THC can be mixed into oils or butter as ingredients in cookies, cupcakes, candy, chocolate and other foods. Burgers, salads, jerky, and entire meals can also contain added THC. It can also be mixed in soda, juice, or other drinks. It can be hard to tell the difference between marijuana edibles and other foods, so it’s important to keep marijuana edibles away from children, pets, or others.

2. Are the effects of edibles different from smoking marijuana?

The effects of eating or drinking edibles can be very different from smoking marijuana or using a vaporizer. When people smoke marijuana, they feel the effect almost right away. When a person starts to feel the effects, they may stop smoking, which can control the dose. However, when people eat or drink marijuana, their bodies take longer to digest and metabolize it (break it down) before they feel the effects. By the time they feel “high,” it’s too late to control the dose. How someone will react to edibles depends on the type and strength of the edibles, the person’s body mass, chemistry, metabolism, and the amount consumed.ⁱ These factors, combined with non-standard dosage labeling for marijuana edibles, make it common for a person to accidentally eat or drink a higher dose of THC than planned.

3. How long does it take to feel the effects from eating or drinking edibles?

The time needed to feel the effects of edible marijuana products will be different for each person, depending on their body’s ability to metabolize foods and the type of edible consumed. For example, mints with THC will produce an effect faster than cookies with THC, because mints are absorbed in the mouth and get into the blood quickly, while a cookie has to be processed by the liver. People with faster metabolisms may feel the effects after an hour of eating or drinking an edible. People with slower metabolisms may feel the effects a few hours later. The amount of food a person has before having marijuana edibles may also affect how quickly their body metabolizes the edibles.ⁱⁱ

The type of edible can also affect how they are metabolized. Many suckers, lozenges, tinctures (liquid extract), and hard candies are digested quickly in the mouth. Cookies, brownies, and other baked goods take a longer time to digest in the stomach and the effects will last much longer. Items such as drinks and chocolates are absorbed both in the mouth and stomach and have faster and long-lasting effects. The effects of edibles usually last between 3-10 hours, depending on the individual and the amount taken.

It is important to remember that the effects of edibles are not felt right away and could take hours. The effect that comes right away after smoking marijuana usually acts as a signal to stop, while the delayed effects of edibles can cause people to accidentally consume high levels of marijuana.

4. How strong are marijuana edibles?

Eating or drinking marijuana edibles can have a stronger effect on the body than smoking marijuana. When THC is inhaled, it travels directly to the brain and a person can feel the effects right away. When eating or drinking an edible, the THC is metabolized by the liver, which converts THC to a stronger form called the “11-hydroxy-THC”. This form of THC can cross the blood-brain barrier and have a long and intense effect.ⁱⁱⁱ

Edibles are usually made with a higher dose of marijuana oil or butter. A single edible, like a cookie or a cupcake, can have more than one “dose” (10mg) of marijuana. Eating an entire cookie or a cupcake with added THC can result in accidentally consuming multiple doses of marijuana.



5. Are edibles labeled accurately?

Even though state regulations for medical marijuana products are being carried out across California, marijuana edibles are not monitored by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). As a result, a marijuana edible label may not correctly represent the list or amounts of ingredients in the product. Lack of industry standards and monitoring systems have resulted in inconsistent and inaccurate labeling. The strength of edibles can vary from batch to batch, and even professional distributors can have difficulty advertising the correct dosages. For this reason, the THC level on the label may not always reflect the true strength of the product.^{iv} Due to inconsistent testing, marijuana edible products may contain poisons such as artificial fertilizers and chemicals used to kill insects. California is working to regulate medical marijuana products in an effort to ensure greater consistency and accuracy.

6. How can you tell the difference between edibles and regular foods?

A lack of standard rules and consistency on labeling can make it hard for consumers to know what products contain marijuana. Some edibles are clearly labeled as marijuana products, while others are more difficult to identify. Edibles without clear labeling can be especially dangerous for young children who cannot read or understand the packaging. Many marijuana-related emergency room admissions for small children result from accidental consumption of marijuana edibles.^v

Pay close attention to the labels, and look for marijuana plant leaves, green crosses, and other marijuana related words or images like the ones below:



The quality and safety of marijuana products are not currently guaranteed by industry and consumer standards and monitoring systems. Many of the same health risks related to inhaling marijuana smoke or vapors also apply to marijuana edibles. It can be easy to accidentally consume high doses of marijuana with edibles due to their slow-acting properties. Care must be taken to avoid individual and public health harms linked to all marijuana products.

ⁱ Hancock, Barker, VanDyke, & Holmes, *Notes from the Field: Death Following Ingestion of an Edible Marijuana Product*, Center for Disease Control Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, July 24, 2015.

ⁱⁱ Id.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wall & Perez-Reyes, *The metabolism of delta 9-tetrahydrocannabinol and related cannabinoids in man*, J Clin Pharmacol, 1981.

^{iv} *Don't Eat the Whole Thing: How Edibles Became the Marijuana Industry's Biggest Headache*, Slate.com, June 11, 2014.

^v Wang, Roosevelt, & Heard, *Pediatric Marijuana Exposures in Medical Marijuana State*, JAMA Pediatrics, 2013.