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Home > Health News > Medicinal Cannabis: What It Is, Its Legal Status In India And Everything You Need To Know

HEALTH

# Medicinal cannabis: What it is, its legal status in India and everything you need to know

Hyderabad-based pharmaceutical major Dr Reddy's Laboratories announced it would be acquiring the German firm Nimbus Health — licensed pharmaceutical wholesaler from Germany focusing on medical cannabis

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A worker holds medical cannabis, at UNIVO Pharmaceuticals in the coastal city of Ashkelon, Israel. Image used for representational purposes. AP

Pharmaceutical major Dr Reddy's Laboratories on 3 February announced that it would acquire German firm Nimbus Health.

Nimbus Health is a privately owned, licensed pharmaceutical wholesaler from Germany focusing on medical cannabis in Germany.

What does this deal mean for India? Is medicinal cannabis even legal in India?

### What is medicinal cannabis?

Let's first understand what exactly medicinal cannabis is.

Medical marijuana refers to using marijuana to treat certain medical conditions.

Several pharmaceutical drugs based on cannabis, in purified and standardised form, have been made available for medical use.

However, the use of herbal cannabis in medicine remains highly controversial, in part because of the lack of standardisation among products to ensure safe and consistent dosing and in part because of disagreement over legalisation.

### Where is medicinal cannabis legal?

Cannabis is decriminalised and allowed for medical use in several regions of North America, Africa, Australia, Europe and South America.

Portugal, which decriminalised all drug use in 2001, does allow medical marijuana. Patients can buy it from pharmacies with a doctor's prescription.

Italy has also allowed medical marijuana, prescribed by doctors and distributed through pharmacies, since 2013. After years of very strict laws and lengthy prison sentences (which are still in effect), Thailand's government has legalised marijuana for medical use.

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In America, many states such as California have legalised medicinal cannabis. Thirty-six states and the capital, Guam, Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands have legalised marijuana for medical use.



the valuation of the legal cannabis market is to be \$146.4 billion by 2025-end. AFP

#### What about India?

In India, while trade and consumption of cannabis is banned under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act of 1985, calls for legalising its use for medicinal purposes have grown stronger over the years.

In January, the Centre told the Delhi High Court that the use of cannabis is not completely banned in the country as its medical and scientific use is allowed under the law.

In 2018, Uttarakhand had become the first state in the country to allow commercial cultivation of hemp crops. A year later, the Madhya Pradesh government also did the same.

In fact, in February 2020 India opened its first medical cannabis clinic — Vedi Wellness Centre in Bengaluru. Odisha-based startup HempCann Solutions is behind the clinic, which prescribes cannabis-infused tablets to improve health and wellness.

#### What is Dr Reddy's deal?

Dr Reddy's Laboratories, based in Hyderabad, according to a *Moneycontrol* report, has agreed to acquire Nimbus Health, a privately owned, licensed pharmaceutical wholesaler focusing on medical cannabis, for an upfront payment, apart from performance and milestone-based earn-outs over the next four years.

Dr Reddy's said that the acquisition will allow the company to build on Nimbus Health's strengths and introduce medical cannabis-based medicines as a promising treatment option for patients.

The company will be operating under the brand Nimbus Health and as a wholly-owned subsidiary of Dr Reddy's.

"As more European countries adopt the usage of medical cannabis, the ability to leverage and access newer geographies will be key," said Patrick Aghanian, Head of European Generics, Dr Reddy's.

#### Benefits of medicinal cannabis

There's strong scientific evidence that marijuana or its ingredients can ease chronic pain, chemotherapy-induced nausea and symptoms of multiple sclerosis.

Some prescription drugs use cannabis chemicals or synthetic versions to treat certain forms of epilepsy or weight loss and nausea in AIDS or cancer patients. There are also studies that say that the relaxing effects of marijuana may help improve sleep disorders, such as insomnia. And improved sleep may also occur when pain is reduced from marijuana usage.

#### Demand for medicinal cannabis

In Germany, after it was legalised in 2017, the medical cannabis market in Germany grew at a compounded annual growth rate of 55 per cent so far and reached a value of around 122 million euros in 2021 with a growth of around 25 per cent over the previous year, reported *Moneycontrol*.

An *Indian Express* report stated that the valuation of the legal cannabis market is to be \$146.4 billion by 2025-end.

With inputs from agencies

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