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A Beginner's Guide to THC Edibles

A 101 on eating and drinking your weed

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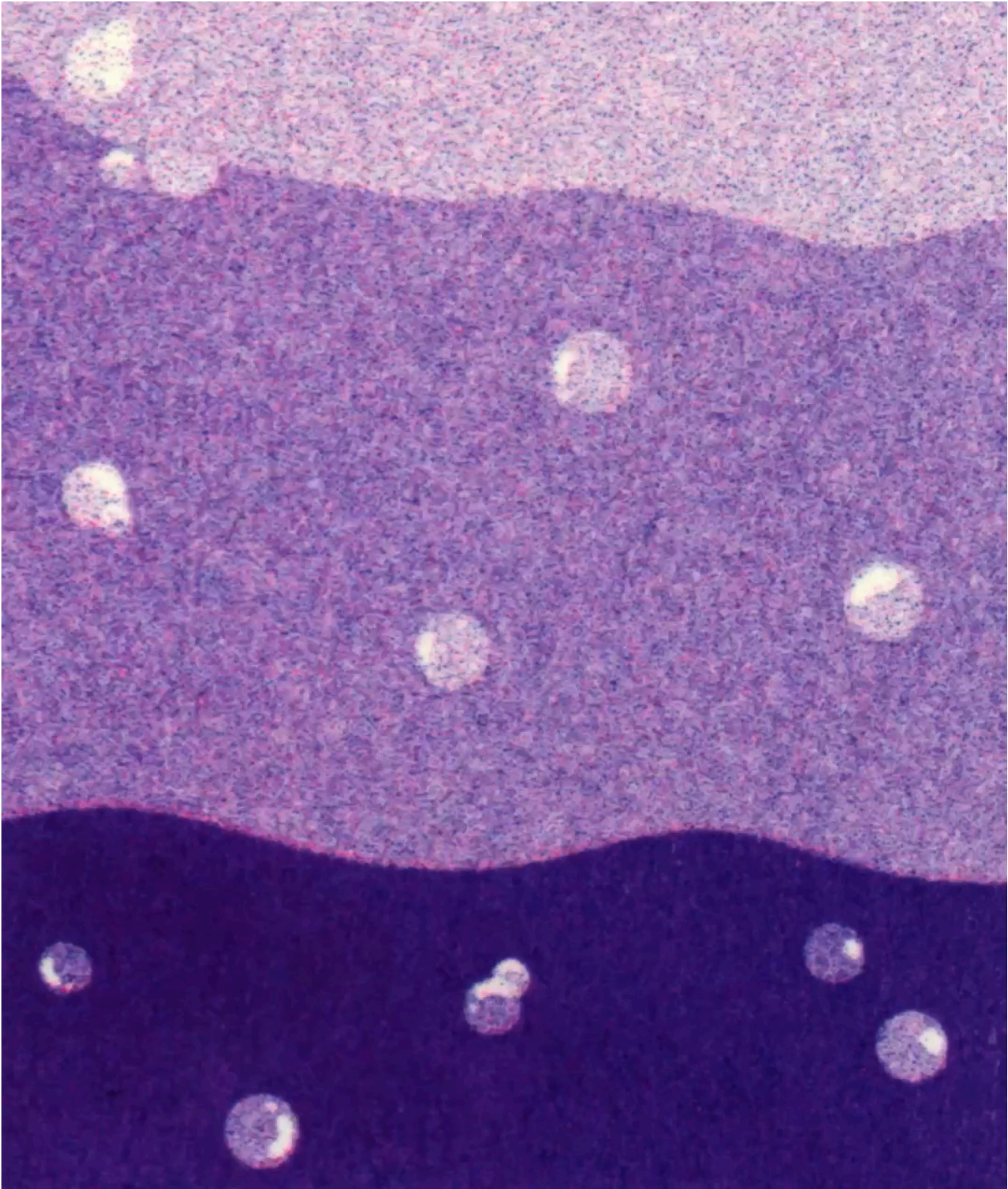


Illustration By Angel Tianying Yu

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Long gone are the days of slacker stoners and scrappy, homemade spacecakes; in the last decade, weed has experienced a serious glow-up. As of 2025, half of US states have legalized recreational adult use and/or medical programs. In states like California, which was the first to legalize medical use 29 years ago, along with Colorado and Washington, which both legalized recreational adult use in 2012, cannabis culture is ubiquitous. Even with its current limitations, the nascent category has exploded into a multi-billion-dollar industry brimming with innovation and choices, from artisanal THC-infused confections to sodas or powders you can sprinkle into any drink of your choice. We've consulted experts to demystify this new terrain, but first, some necessary precautions:

Cannabis remains federally illegal and is still categorized as a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970; in some states, there are individuals who are serving time in prison for small-scale possession crimes. Given this inconsistency, use cannabis products containing THC (short for delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol) where its use is legal. In some instances, there are loopholes; the 2018 Farm Bill law permits states to allow vendors to sell legal hemp-derived products (see glossary below) because the THC therein is not extracted from the cannabis plant yet still elicits similar psychosomatic properties.



The fragmentation of this reality has made things exciting, confusing, and frustrating for the average individual who, when walking into a dispensary for the first time, is confronted with a wall of packages and detailed, jargony labels. Some due diligence is required to understand what happens when your cannabis goes down the hatch, but never fear. We tapped Dr. Riley Kirk, a PhD in Pharmaceutical Sciences, cannabis educator, and author of *Reefer Wellness*, and Dr. Miyabe Shields, a PhD pharmaceutical scientist specializing in the structural biochemistry of the endocannabinoid system and co-founder of *Network of Applied Pharmacognosy*, to breakdown cannabis essentials.

What is THC?

THC “is the molecule produced by the cannabis plant that is responsible for most of its euphoric and therapeutic effects,” says Dr. Shields. Meanwhile, the terms sativa, indica, and hybrid refer to the genetic lineage/origin of cannabis species. There used to be a greater difference between these designations, but according to Shields, right now, the terms just describe differences in genetics. That said, these are the basics on the most common types:

Sativa

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to mature,” Dr. Kirk says. “Known for their uplifting effects that are more of a head high than a body high,” Kirk continues, “the effects are often attributed to unique chemistry like the presence of THCV (tetrahydrocannabivarin, a therapeutic non-psychoactive cannabinoid best known as an appetite-suppressant along with other anti-inflammatory and anti-psychotic properties) and stimulating, aromatic compounds called terpenes [see more in glossary below].”

Indica

“Indica dominant strains are typically plants that are shorter in stature and have thicker leaves,” Kirk explains. “The effects when consumed are a more sedating body high and are often higher in THC compared to classic sativas and contain calming, relaxing terpenes.”

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Hybrid

“Hybrids are crosses of genetics between indicas and sativas and offer a more balanced effect profile that is somewhere in the middle,” Kirk says. “Most flower on the current legal market are hybrids.”

CBD, short for Cannabidiol, is the main non-intoxicating active compound in the cannabis plant. Kirk notes that CBD has many potential medicinal uses such as for pain and inflammation, anxiety and seizures. It is often included in THC products at a 1:1 or 2:1 ratio. Its inclusion, Kirk says, “can help balance out the effects of THC, making it a great addition for most people.”

FAQ

Note: For the purposes of this article, whether you swallow THC or absorb it under your tongue, anything that goes in your mouth—such as cannabis-infused gummies, beverages, and other ingestibles—is considered an edible.

How much should a THC-curious person take?

After selecting a strain, check the label for dosage, which is often listed in milligrams and will determine the impact of effects. What constitutes a microdose is often disputed, but in Kirk’s opinion, she considers 1 mg a microdose, below 2.5 mg a small dose, and a standard dose usually 5 mg to 10 mg. “But for THC naive people, or for sensitive populations, even 5 mg can be a lot,” she adds.

How do I know my tolerance?

The impact of THC varies person to person, says Shields, who notes that the typical threshold to feel the effects of edibles is between 2 to 10 mg of THC, but some people have a higher dose threshold for edibles. “Our data points to around 15 percent of the population not being able to feel them at any dose,” Shields says.

Ultimately, while many labels will advise a 30-to 45-minute wait time, onset is dependent on absorption. In other words, how THC products are consumed, whether through digestion, under the tongue, by pill or drink, will impact how rapidly the effects kick in.

Shields says cannabis beverages typically kick in somewhere between 20 to 60 minutes. But as she notes, “it will be different for every product’s emulsion type, every person’s GI tract, metabolism, and whether or not they have eaten that day, etc.”

According to Kirk, “people will often feel the effects of beverages a lot faster compared to gummies because [...] some of the THC can be absorbed in the mouth before being processed by the liver.” To get technical, Shields says that “cannabinoids are fats, and just like oil and vinegar don’t mix in a bowl, cannabinoids do not mix in with water.” Meaning that another ingredient must be added to help stabilize the mixture to create what you sip in a THC-infused drink. This mixture is what Shields attributes to a faster onset.

If you spot the phrase “rapid onset” on THC drink labels, expect effects to kick in even sooner (anywhere between 15 to 20 minutes). This usually means the product has been specifically formulated for fast-acting effects using nanoemulsion technology that allows for smaller particle sizes in a water-based solution and faster absorption of the THC, Kirk says. While many edibles often offer a similar experience, Kirk adds that “the effects from gummies may last longer and be more sedating, due to extensive metabolism through the liver, often providing a more ‘couch locking’ effect.”

What about tinctures?

Consider cannabis tinctures a distant, discreet stoner sibling to bitters at the bar: both found in dropper bottles, where a little goes a long way. Some are alcohol-based liquids, which can be added into beverages; others are oil-based, which can be absorbed under

tions, Kirk says. Overall, they offer more versatility and control for DIY dosing.

Dispensary Decoder

A glossary of high-key buzzwords

As products vary state by state, label literacy is crucial to understand exactly what you're buying, Kirk says. "Consumers should read carefully to ensure their products are tested, and definitely note the amount of THC and other active compounds like CBD. When in doubt, ask your budtender.

Terpenes

"Terpenes are molecules that the cannabis plant creates that contribute to its aroma," Shields says. "Many familiar plants and herbs have terpenes, too, like lavender, mint, sage, basil, oregano, etc." Aside from giving each strain their unique smell, terpenes also contribute to effects where some may be sedating (linalool, terpinene, myrcene), stimulating (limonene, pinene) and have medicinal benefits (caryophyllene, beta caryophyllene).

Hemp-derived

Hemp-derived refers to any cannabis products that originate from the hemp plant's starting material. "This means that the product was produced from hemp cannabis.

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smell. Because hemp was federally legalized and recategorized as an agricultural product separately regulated from marijuana, hemp-derived products can travel across state lines legally. This includes Delta-8 products.

Delta-8

“Delta-8 refers to Delta-8 THC which is a synthesized version of THC that is slightly different from the natural compound,” Kirk says. “Delta-8 THC is intoxicating and can get you high, but it typically takes a larger dose to feel the same effects compared to the THC that is naturally found in the plant.”

Full plant extract

“A full plant extract refers to a product made from cannabis that contains all (or the vast majority) of the compounds that the plant makes. This includes active compounds like THC and CBD, but also the smelly molecules called terpenes, flavonoids, and other classes of medicinal compounds,” Kirk says. “Full plant extracts have been shown to display what is called the ‘entourage effect,’ which is a way of showing that there is synergy when all the plant compounds are able to work together rather than taking them in isolation.”

Live rosin

Typically, cannabis plants are harvested then dried and cured to establish shelf life and stability. “Live rosin refers to rosin or resin (the sticky amber residue from plants) made from cannabis plants that have not undergone the dry and cure processes yet. As a result, the plant material maintains the terpene profile” and bears a higher concentration and aroma, Kirk says.

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reefer wellness

Dr. C. Miyabe Shields, PhD pharmaceutical scientist specializing in the structural biochemistry of the endocannabinoid system and co-founder of Network of Applied Pharmacognosy.

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