

# Bringing commonsense cannabis education to the masses

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Kent Hutchison records an installment of his new online course series Medical Cannabis: Health Effects of THC and CBD at Chautauqua Park in Boulder.  
Credit: Patrick Campbell/CU Boulder

When Kent Hutchison's 70-year-old mother traveled to Colorado in 2014 to explore using marijuana to ease her chronic pain, she got different—often contradictory—advice from every dispensary she visited.

Two years later, when his partner Angela Bryan asked her doctors about using cannabis to quell the side-effects from her breast cancer treatments, she was met with shoulder shrugs and a flat: "We have no idea what to tell you."

"Legalization has led to unprecedented access to cannabis, a projected \$60 billion industry by 2025, and one of the fastest growing job sectors in the economy. Yet even today there is very [little evidence](#)-based information out there for people wanting to weigh pros and cons," says Hutchison, a [psychology professor](#) and cannabis researcher in CU Boulder's CHANGE Lab. "People are hungry for knowledge."

To fill the gap, Hutchison has teamed up with the global online learning platform Coursera to launch a first-of-its kind educational series "[Medical Cannabis: Health Effects of THC and CBD](#)."

Launched in June, the new four-course online program, known as a specialization, is intended for clinicians, cannabis industry professionals, patients, family members and the generally curious. Through [video lectures](#) by Hutchison, readings, and guest interviews with scientists and health care practitioners it aims to answer questions like:

How can marijuana really help patients with cancer, insomnia, [chronic pain](#) or seizure disorders? What's the difference between THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) and CBD (cannabidiol)? Which strains are best for what conditions? And what can people who use it medicinally do to reduce risks and maximize benefits?

Coursera's 40 million global users can audit some elements of the specialization for free. Those who want to earn a certificate of completion must subscribe for \$49 per month until they've completed the courses and submit coursework for a grade. The specialization will also be included in the CU on Coursera program, allowing students, faculty, and staff to earn the completion certificate at no cost.

"This platform enables us to reach audiences that may not be able to come to CU Boulder or may not be interested in academic credit but are still really interested in this topic," says Christopher Haynes, associate director for learning experience design at CU, noting that popular courses on Coursera can draw tens of thousands of students. "There's nothing quite like this course out there."

## **Sharing cutting edge research**

Since 2014, Hutchison and Professor Bryan, also a professor of psychology and neuroscience, have pioneered new methods of studying the health impacts of cannabis, using a [mobile pharmacology laboratory](#) (a white van which travels to subject homes to conduct studies). They currently have several [research projects](#) underway exploring the impacts of cannabis on pain, anxiety, sleep disturbance and other conditions.

While the field of research is young, some studies have already shed light on the risks and benefits. Yet many still remain uninformed.

"People are not getting information from health care providers or public health officials. Rather, they are getting it from the internet, [social media](#) and other sources that aren't always reliable," says Hutchison, who also teaches a 3-credit full-semester class PSYC 4541: Special Topics in Psychology and Neuroscience: Cannabis and Health for CU Boulder students.

The new Coursera specialization consists of four courses, each four weeks in length with an expectation of 2-5 hours of work per week. Students can move through at their own pace.

It will cover the plant's history and chemical make-up, the latest research on its health impacts, and advice—like starting with a lower dose of THC and increasing it slowly if needed—on how to reduce [side-effects](#) while maximizing [health](#) benefits.

"We're trying to help people avoid the common situation where they take too much and have a bad reaction," Hutchison said.

Assignments include going to a dispensary to ask questions about quality control and asking a physician what they know about THC and CBD. Hutchison hopes to see everyone from bud-tenders to doctors earn the specialization and display their certification proudly.

Jessica LeBlanc intends to. She graduated from CU Boulder in May with a psychology degree, has taken classes with Hutchison before, and is now going to school to be a certified herbalist.

"This specialization will be a great complement to my career," she says. "You get the full unbiased spectrum on cannabis and can come out with your own opinions on whether it might be right for you, your patient or your loved one."

**More information:** Medical Cannabis: Health Effects of THC and CBD on Coursera: [www.coursera.org/specialization/medical-cannabis-thc-cbd](http://www.coursera.org/specialization/medical-cannabis-thc-cbd)

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