

Understanding Dementia: Cannabis

Using Cannabis for medical purposes

Choosing to use cannabis for medical purposes should be done in consultation with a health care provider. The evidence of the effectiveness and safety of cannabis for treating medical conditions is still emerging. The limited evidence that is available is not specific to older adults. There are studies that show some potential medical benefit for the use of cannabis in these specific cases such as:

- Nausea and vomiting from chemotherapy
- Muscle contractions or stiffness associated with multiple sclerosis
- Chronic neuropathic pain
- Palliative and end-of-life pain

Cannabis is a drug and can affect how other medications work. If you are currently taking any prescription or over-the-counter medications, it is important to talk to your health care provider or pharmacist. They can assess any interaction cannabis may have with your medications.

Research on Cannabis and Alzheimer

Researchers still have a lot to learn about the long-term effects of cannabis on the brain. Some studies have shown that long-term cannabis use is associated with memory problems.

A few clinical trials have identified that cannabis can help manage behavioural symptoms in people with dementia, including agitation and aggression, but only in some cases.

Other trials have studied the effects of cannabinoids (including THC and the synthetic nabilone) on behavioural symptoms, but more investigation is required.

The **Alzheimer Society Research Program** has funded research on how endocannabinoids affect mood and anxiety in dementia and how the synthetic cannabinoid nabilone can treat agitation in Alzheimer's disease.

References:

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/older-adults-and-medical-marijuana-reduced-stigma-and-increased-use-2-2020040119321>
Alzheimers.ca – Cannabis and the treatment of dementia
<https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/public-health-topics/cannabis-information-for-older-adults.aspx>

What is Cannabis?

Cannabis is a plant that has chemicals called cannabinoids. The most common cannabinoids are THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) and CBD (cannabidiol).

THC affects your brain to make you feel “high” and changes how you think, feel and act. The higher the level of THC, the greater the intoxicating effects.

THC is mostly responsible for the health risks associated with cannabis.

CBD does not cause intoxicating effects and can lessen the THC effects. CBD is being studied for possible medical uses.

Everyone's response to cannabis is different and can vary from one time to the next.

How does Cannabis affect the brain

The cannabinoids in cannabis interact with a network of cell receptors throughout the human body called the **endocannabinoid system**. This system exists in our bodies to interact with the naturally occurring endocannabinoids, which play a role in regulating a variety of different bodily functions.

Cannabinoid receptors are found in most tissues and organs but are particularly numerous in the brain. When cannabis is consumed and its cannabinoids act on these receptors, they alter the release of neurochemicals in the brain, which changes how brain cells communicate with each other. This, in turn, affects various processes within our bodies, including appetite, pain, mood, memory and learning.

What's the bottom line?

Cannabis use among the elderly is growing as there is more public acceptance and reduced stigma. Medical cannabis is increasingly viewed as an effective option for managing insomnia and chronic pain. It's key to have an informed discussion with your doctor to weigh the safety risks, especially if you have cardiac issues, are taking multiple medications, or have cognitive changes due to aging. Educate yourself (and your doctor) as much as possible about cannabis before starting to use it. Most of the adverse effects associated with cannabis usage are dose-related, so it is important to know the strength of the marijuana you are taking and to "start low and go slow": start with the lowest effective dose and take your time working your way up to a dose that alleviates your symptoms with a minimum of side effects.

For more information, please contact us:



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