Marijuana and Veterans Issues

Veterans consume cannabis at rates far higher than the general population, and many report using it for medical purposes

"We conducted a cross-sectional analysis of Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data from 2016 to 2023. The analytic sample included 907,136 adults aged 18 to 80 years with complete data on self-reported veteran status and cannabis use. … Among participants, 114,193 (12.6%) were Veterans. ... Veterans aged 50–64 years were 43% more likely to report cannabis use than non-Veterans, and those aged 65–80 were 22% more likely."
Cannabis use among veterans versus non-veterans in the USA, 2016-2023: A cross-sectional analysis, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 2026

"Among 24,089 eligible respondents, 420 (1.7 percent) reported a current clinical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder. In total, 106 (28.2 percent) people with post-traumatic stress disorder reported past-year cannabis use, compared to 11.2 percent of those without post-traumatic stress disorder."
Does cannabis use modify the effect of post-traumatic stress disorder on severe depression and suicidal ideation? Evidence from a population-based cross-sectional study of Canadians, *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 2019

Many veterans report substituting medical cannabis for prescription drugs and alcohol

"A total of 510 veterans of US military service participated in the survey. … A majority of participants (463; 91%) reported that medicinal cannabis treatment helped them to experience a greater quality of life, fewer psychological symptoms (407; 80%), and fewer physical symptoms (371; 73%). Many more reported using less alcohol (236; 46%), fewer medications (229; 45%), less tobacco (120; 24%), and fewer opioids (105; 21%) as a result of medicinal cannabis use."
Medicinal cannabis use and an alternative to prescription and over-the-counter medication use among US veterans, *Clinical Therapeutics*, 2023

Veterans often report using cannabis to treat symptoms of chronic pain and mood disorders, like post-traumatic stress. Clinical data supports the use of cannabis treatment for these indications.

"Cannabis use itself was relatively common [among veterans], with 179 [out of 470 respondents] reporting past medical use."
2026 IAVA Findings Related to Alcohol, Tobacco and Cannabis Use

"Among veterans with chronic pain in VA primary care enrolled in a pragmatic trial, a new NP [natural products] survey revealed prevalent use of multiple NPs concurrently, and in some cases, as substitutes for prescribed medications. … 40% (of respondents) reporting using cannabis products. Indications for cannabis among those reporting use were pain or mobility (81%), sleep (62%), PTSD or anxiety (43%), stress (43%), and depression (29%)."
Natural products for chronic pain: A new survey of patterns of use, beliefs, concerns, and disclosures to providers, *Global Advances in Integrative Medicine and Health*, 2025

"In this retrospective naturalistic study, we followed 14 relatively mature (32-68 years of age), treatment-resistant, chronic combat post-traumatic patients who remained severely symptomatic despite treatment with many lines of conventional treatment prior to receiving medicinal cannabis. … To the best of our knowledge, this is the first published study examining long-term cannabis efficacy in chronic combat treatment-resistant PTSD patients. … After treatment with cannabis, total sleep score, subjective sleep quality, and sleep duration significantly improved. … Total PTSD symptom score and its subdomains (intrusiveness, avoidance, and alertness) showed [also] improvement. … Future research should clarify the long-term effects of cannabis on different groups of patients suffering from PTSD."
Medical cannabis treatment for treatment-resistant combat PTSD, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 2023

In states where medical cannabis is legal, opioid-related mortality has fallen significantly

"[M]edical marijuana laws reduce the misuse of prescription opioids, as reflected in treatment admissions and overdose deaths, primarily through the allowance and opening of dispensaries."
Do medical marijuana laws reduce addictions and deaths related to pain killers? *Journal of Health Economics*, 2018

"Colorado's legalization of recreational cannabis sales and use resulted in a 0.7 deaths per month reduction in opioid-related deaths. This reduction represents a reversal of the upward trend in opioid-related deaths in Colorado."
Recreational cannabis legalization and opioid-related deaths in Colorado, 2000-2015, *American Journal of Public Health*, 2017

Studies of pain patients eligible for medical marijuana access find that most subjects significantly reduce or eliminate their use of opioids following cannabis therapy

"Between August 1 – December 31, 2016 a total of 2290 patients were enrolled in the program under the qualifying condition of intractable pain; 45 of these patients were previously enrolled in the program under an additional qualifying condition. This report focuses on the 2245 patients who were certified for intractable pain and enrolled in the program for the first time during this interval. … A large proportion (58%) of patients on other pain medications when they started taking medical cannabis were able to reduce their use of these meds according to health care practitioner survey results. Opioid medications were reduced for 38% of patients (nearly 60% of these reduced at least one opioid by ≥50%), benzodiazepines were reduced for 3%, and other pain medications were reduced for 22%. If only the 353 patients (60.2%, based on medication list in first Patient Self-Evaluation) known to be taking opioid medications at baseline are included, 62.6% (221/353) were able to reduce or eliminate opioid usage after six months."
Minnesota Department of Health, Intractable Pain Patients in the Minnesota Medical Cannabis Program: Experience of Enrollees During the First Five Months, 2018