Relationship Between Marijuana and Opioids

Cannabis access is associated with reduced rates of opioid use and abuse, opioid-related hospitalizations, opioid-related traffic fatalities, opioid-related drug treatment admissions, and opioid-related overdose deaths

We used New York State Medical Cannabis and Prescription Monitoring Program data (2017-2019), including 8358 patients on long-term opioid therapy, who also received medical cannabis for chronic pain. … The medical cannabis group included 4892 patients, and the no-medical cannabis group included 3466 patients. Overall, opioid prescription discontinuation was 2 times higher among those using medical cannabis, compared with the no-medical cannabis group. … These findings suggest medical cannabis may provide an alternative therapy for some patients with a long history of prescription opioids and facilitate their reduction in opioid use."
Medical cannabis and opioid prescription discontinuation among chronic pain patients on long-term opioid therapy, *Journal of Addiction Medicine*, 2026

"This study examined associations between medical and recreational cannabis law (MCL/RCL) enactment and opioid prescribing among Veterans' Health Administration (VHA) patients with chronic pain overall and by age. … Compared to states without cannabis laws, MCL enactment was associated with reductions in ≥30-day opioid prescribing. … Following RCL enactment (vs MCL), reductions were observed in ≥30-day opioid prescribing, high-dose opioid prescribing, and opioid/benzodiazepine co-prescribing. ...Findings suggest that greater legal cannabis access may be associated with modest reductions in opioid prescriptions among patients with chronic pain, potentially reflecting changes in patient and clinician treatment decisions related to pain management."
Cannabis legalization and opioid prescribing in Veterans Health Administration patients: 2013-2022, *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 2026

Cannabis access is associated with reductions in overall prescription drug activity

"This 10-year observational study represents the longest follow-up of medical cannabis therapy specifically in CLBP patients and demonstrates sustained, clinically meaningful improvements exceeding pre-specified [minimal clinically important difference] MCID thresholds for opioid reduction, pain relief, and functional disability. … The 89.8% reduction in opioid consumption substantially exceeds prior reports. … Substantial polypharmacy reductions occurred among completers. Tramadol/tapentadol use decreased from 89.7% to 5.6% (− 84.0% points), benzodiazepines from 78.8% to 5.3% (− 73.5 pp), SSRIs from 77.7% to 5.8% (− 71.9 pp), and gabapentinoids from 31.3% to 0.6% (− 30.7 pp). These reductions were clinically driven rather than protocol-mandated, reflecting individual physician-patient decisions based on symptom response."
Ten-year outcomes of medical cannabis for chronic low back pain: opioid reduction, pain relief, and functional improvement in 1,000 patients, *European Spine Journal*, 2026

The adjunctive use of cannabis augments the analgesic properties of opioids

"This Phase II study evaluated analgesia, abuse liability, and cognitive performance of hydromorphone and oral delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC; dronabinol) using a within-subject, double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled, human laboratory trial. … Analgesia only improved in the hydromorphone + dronabinol 2.5 mg condition. … These data suggest that dronabinol may enhance the analgesic effects of *a low dose of* hydromorphone, indicative of possible opioid-sparing effects, but that

this effect only occurs within a narrow dose range beyond which hyperalgesia, increased risk for AEs [adverse events], and abuse liability are more likely to occur."
Within-subject, double-blinded, randomized, and placebo-controlled evaluation of the combined effects of the cannabinoid dronabinol and the opioid hydromorphone in a human laboratory model, *Neuropsychopharmacology*, 2021

Patients often use cannabis as a substitute for other controlled substances, including prescription medications, alcohol, and tobacco

"In this prospective, observational study, 52 patients with confirmed painful DN [diabetic neuropathy], unresponsive to at least three prior analgesics plus non-pharmacological interventions, were recruited from a single clinic. Following a 1-month washout, patients initiated inhaled medical-grade cannabis (20% THC, <1% CBD), titrated individually. … Patients in our study decreased their morphine-equivalent doses by more than 90%, reduced their gabapentin doses by 97%, duloxetine by 93%, and pregabalin by 79% without developing rebound pain."
Long-term efficacy and safety of inhaled cannabis therapy for painful diabetic neuropathy: A 5-year longitudinal observational study, *Biomedicines*, 2025

Cannabis use is associated with greater rates of opioid use treatment retention and may mitigate opioid-related cravings

"Among 197 participants, 89 (45.2%) reported cannabis use to manage symptoms of opioid withdrawal in the past six months. In multivariable analysis, cannabis use for opioid withdrawal was significantly associated with self-reported reductions in opioid use in the same time period. … Aligned with other studies, these findings support conducting experimental trials of cannabinoids to support individuals experiencing opioid withdrawal and living with pain."
Self-reported cannabis use to manage opioid withdrawal symptoms and reductions in opioid use among people who use unregulated opioids: A cross-sectional analysis, *Journal of Cannabis Research*, 2026

"This serial cross-sectional observational study used staggered adoption difference-in-differences models to analyze data (2012, 2015, 2018, 2022) from 28,069 PWID [people who inject drugs] from 13 states. … The magnitude of the decline in daily opioid use (9-11 percentage points) in a population with highly prevalent use post RCL+MCL [recreational cannabis legalization and medical cannabis legalization] passage was striking. Notably, the magnitude of this decline was equivalent across all racial and ethnic groups and for males and females. … Our findings suggest that ongoing efforts to reduce regulatory barriers and legal and criminal consequences of cannabis use via RCL+MCLs may have the potential to help reduce overdoses and other opioid-related harms among PWID."
Cannabis legalization and cannabis and opioid use in a large, multistate sample of people who inject drugs: A staggered adoption difference-in-differences analysis, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence,* 2026