Cannabis Use by Older Adult Populations

The self-reported use of cannabis by older adults and/or seniors has grown significantly in recent years.

The fastest growing demographic reporting marijuana use in the United States is those adults ages 55 and older.

CBS News, May 19, 2016

Nationwide, an estimated nine percent of those ages 50 or older report having consumed cannabis within the past year.

Comparing older nonmedical and medical cannabis users: Health-related characteristics, cannabis use patterns, and cannabis sources. The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse, 2021

Among a representative sample of US adults ages 50 and older residing in a legal state (Washington), 38% of men and 25% of women acknowledged having used cannabis in the past year.

Cannabis use frequency, route of administration, and co-use of alcohol among older adults in Washington state, Journal of Cannabis Research, 2021

An increasing percentage of older adults are turning to the use of cannabis exclusively for therapeutic purposes

Nearly 20 percent of those US adults ages 50 and older who report consuming cannabis within the past year define their use as medicinal.

Recent trends in cannabis use in older Americans. Annals of Internal Medicine, 2021

Among a cohort of seniors (ages 65 or older) residing in a legal state (California), 78 percent of those who reported consuming cannabis within the past three years defined their use as medical. “Most older adults in the sample initiated [their] cannabis use after the age of 60 years and used it primarily for medical purposes to treat pain, sleep disturbance, anxiety, and/or depression.”


In a national 2020 survey of 1,000 baby boomers (ages 56 to 74) who acknowledge consuming cannabis, half of respondents defined their use as medicinal.

VeriLife 2020 survey

An increasing body of scientific data shows that the use of cannabis by older adults is associated with improvements in their overall quality of life

“In this prospective study, we describe the characteristics and outcomes of approximately 10,000 patients treated with medical cannabis. … Quality of life (QOL) was assessed both at intake and at 6 months in 4,143 patients. While only 12.9% of patients reported good QOL prior to treatment initiation, 69.9% reported good QOL at 6 months. … Results showed high adherence, high safety with a low incidence of adverse events, and a high rate of effectiveness in the prescribed treatment, as well as a decrease in pain levels, improvement in QOL, and a reduction in the consumption of concomitant medications.”
Adherence, safety, and effectiveness of medical cannabis and epidemiological characteristics of the patient population: A prospective study, Frontiers in Medicine, 2022

“Cross-sectional data from anonymous surveys were collected from 139 persons over the age of 60 using medical cannabis in the past year. … We identified a strong positive association between higher frequency of cannabis use and improvement to HRQL [health-related quality of life] and HCU [health-care utilization] scores. … Our regression modeling also identified a strong positive relationship between higher frequency of cannabis use and self-reported improvements to pain symptoms. The positive relationship between near-daily use and improved reports offers further evidence of the perceived value of medical cannabis as a therapeutic approach for pain management.”
Assessing health-related outcomes of medical cannabis use among older persons: Findings from Colorado and Illinois. Clinical Gerontologist, 2020

“We describe patterns of recreational and medical marijuana use and self-reported health among older persons using a geographically sampled survey in Colorado. … [S]urveyed older persons aged more than 60 who have legal access to recreational and medical marijuana described multiple patterns of use of marijuana in the past year, and the majority felt that marijuana use had an overall positive impact on their quality of life.”
Patterns of marijuana use and health impact: A survey among older Coloradoans. Gerontology & Geriatric Medicine, 2019

Cannabis use by older subjects is associated with greater rates of physical activity

“Data were obtained from the 2005–2006 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. A total of 2,092 participants (ages 20–59; 48.8% female) had accelerometer-measured sedentary behavior, light physical activity, and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity. Participants were classified as light, moderate, frequent, or non-current cannabis users depending on how often they used cannabis in the previous 30 days. … Frequent cannabis users engaged in more physical activity than non-current users. … Findings tended to be stronger among adults over 40 and those who did not smoke cigarettes. … Our findings do not support the mainstream perception of cannabis users as living sedentary lifestyles.”
Cannabis use, sedentary behavior, and physical activity in a nationally representative sample of US adults. The Harm Reduction Journal, 2021

“We measured differences in body mass index (BMI), exercise behavior, and cardiovascular fitness between older adult cannabis users and nonusers participating in an exercise intervention trial. … Results of this analysis indicated that compared to older adult non-users, older adult cannabis users had lower BMI at the beginning of an exercise intervention study, engaged in more weekly exercise days during the intervention, and were engaging in more exercise-related activities at the conclusion of the intervention. Although preliminary, these findings suggest that it may be easier for older adults who endorse using cannabis to increase and maintain their exercise behavior, potentially because cannabis users have lower body weight than their non-using peers. At minimum, the evidence suggests that cannabis use does not hinder older adults’ ability to engage in physical activity, to participate in a supervised exercise program, or to increase their fitness as a result of physical activity.”
Exercise intervention outcomes with cannabis users and nonusers aged 60 and older. American Journal of Health and Behavior, 2020