

Marijuana and Veterans Issues

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

Among military veterans who acknowledged using cannabis within the past year, 41 percent classified their marijuana use as medical – a percentage that is twice as high as is reported by adults in the general population. [Recent cannabis use among Veterans in the United States: Results from a national sample. Addictive Behaviors, 2018](#)

According to nationwide survey data conducted by The American Legion in 2017, 39 percent of respondents affirmed that they "know a veteran" who is using the plant medicinally. Twenty-two percent of respondents said they themselves "use cannabis to treat a mental or physical condition."

[The American Legion, Survey shows veteran households support research of medical cannabis, 2017](#)

Many veterans report substituting medical cannabis for prescription drugs and alcohol

"Participants [in the study] were 93 US military veterans and members of the Santa Cruz Veterans' Alliance (SCVA). ... The majority of participants reported that they use cannabis as a substitute for other licit and illicit substances. ... [P]articipants reported a high degree of substitution behavior, particularly for alcohol. ... [N]early half the sample reported substituting cannabis for prescription medications. ... The current study also confirms the findings of previous studies that have documented a trend in substitution behavior, where cannabis is substituted for other drugs, which, if associated with reduced harm, could be beneficial for overall health."

[A cross-sectional examination of choice and behavior of veterans with access to free medicinal cannabis, The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse, 2019](#)

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.

According to a review of over 10,000 studies by the National Academy of Sciences, "In adults with chronic pain, patients who were treated with cannabis ... are more likely to experience a clinically significant reduction in pain symptoms. ... There is conclusive or substantial evidence that cannabis and cannabinoids are effective for the treatment for chronic pain in adults."

[National Academy of Sciences, The Health Effects of Cannabis and Cannabinoids, January 2017](#)

A retrospective review of PTSD patients' symptoms published in 2014 in the Journal of Psychoactive Drugs reported a greater than 75 percent reduction CAPS (Clinician Administered Posttraumatic Scale) symptom scores following cannabis therapy.

[PTSD symptom reports of patients evaluated for the New Mexico Medical Cannabis Program, Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, 2014](#)

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, 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 $\geq 50\%$), 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 SelfEvaluation) 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](#)

"During the study period, 2736 patients above 65 years of age began cannabis treatment and answered the initial questionnaire. The mean age was 74.5 ± 7.5 years. The most common indications for cannabis treatment were pain (66.6%) and cancer (60.8%). After six months of treatment, 93.7% of the respondents reported improvement in their condition and the reported pain level was reduced from a median of 8 on a scale of 0-10 to a median of 4. ... After six months, 18.1% stopped using opioid analgesics or reduced their dose. ... Cannabis use may decrease the use of other prescription medicines, including opioids."

[Epidemiological characteristics, safety and efficacy of medical cannabis in the elderly, European Journal of Internal Medicine, 2018](#)