

Arthritis and Medical Cannabis



Arthritis sufferers often have to endure joint pain that diminishes their quality of life. In some cases, the pain can be unbearable. It's not surprising they would rely on medication to help them alleviate that pain. More and more, the medication those patients are turning to is cannabis: in fact, two thirds of Canadians taking medical cannabis are doing so to help ease the pain of arthritis, according to the Canadian Arthritis Society.

A Promising Treatment

While it doesn't cure arthritis, there is increasing evidence that medical cannabis can offer relief from the pain and other symptoms associated with most forms of arthritis.

In addition, for many, medical cannabis may offer a safer alternative to traditional pain medications, particularly highly addictive opioids, but also for many non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), both over-the-counter and prescription varieties. In Canada, the Arthritis Society is funding research into the use of medical cannabis for treatment of arthritis symptoms, and is leading a coalition of voices from across the Canadian health care sector in calling for more investment in medical cannabis research.

Patients, however, are not sitting by waiting for clinical trials that can take years before they try medical cannabis for themselves. In Canada, a study conducted recently at the University of Toronto found that as many as 20% of patients who consult an orthopedic surgeon for chronic musculoskeletal pain are now using cannabis as a pain therapy. Additionally, the study reported that two-thirds of those who are not using medical cannabis are interested in trying it to help treat their pain.

The Challenge: Self-Medicating

The U of T study noted that only a quarter of the cannabis users they surveyed had talked to a physician before beginning to use it.. Another study of primary care patients in Vermont, USA, published in the *Journal of Primary Care & Community Health*, found that 45% of respondents used cannabinoids over the past year but just 18% of those patients said their primary care physician was a good resource for information on cannabis.

This is distressing. Medical cannabis should be treated like any other kind of medicine and patients need to be able to turn to their doctors to understand their options. As with any medicine, the wrong product, improper dosage or contraindications can have unintended or unsafe consequences. Not all varieties of medical cannabis can treat all symptoms. In addition, research indicates that long-term use of some kinds, particularly those higher in THC, can be risky if the patient also suffers from certain mental illnesses.

Often patients who self-medicate try to find the right dosage through trial and error. However, underdosing may lead patients to dismiss the efficacy, while overdosing can lead to side-effects including paranoia.

The Solution: Education

At JMCC, we've seen enough research and heard from enough patients to become convinced of the potential of medical cannabis as a treatment for many kinds of pain, including various forms of arthritis. But, for medical cannabis to become an accepted treatment option, education – both for doctors and patients – is essential.

It is simplistic to say that patients should ask their doctors before using medical cannabis. The unfortunate fact is that doctors themselves are often not educated on the pros and cons of cannabis as a treatment option. As such, they find it difficult to have conversations about its use to improve symptoms of various illnesses.

The solution begins with the medical profession collectively acknowledging that cannabis has medical benefits – and that it should be considered as a viable therapeutic option for some conditions. Moreover, it is an option with lower risks of side effects, including addiction, than other medications. Of course, we agree that more research has to be conducted about the efficacy of cannabis for specific conditions as well as on the best formulations, optimum dosing and the most efficacious administration methods. We also agree this means doctors have to proceed with caution and relay some of that caution to their patients, just as they do with any other medication. Neither is cannabis a cure-all.

The next step is to educate doctors, including students in medical schools, about situations where medical cannabis is effective and to encourage them to discuss it as an option in cases where it is appropriate to do so.

These steps will also go a long way to removing remaining stigmas associated with using cannabis.

Individuals with arthritis have been some of the most active proponents of medical cannabis use, but too many others still continue to suffer because they either don't know that medical cannabis could be a viable and relatively safe treatment for them or they are embarrassed to speak to their doctors about it. With more education and open

communication, we can ensure that those suffering from arthritis are presented with a full range of pain-relief options.