

Cannabis as a Substitute for Prescription Drugs

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Definition of terms

- **Substitution**
 - Conscious/unconscious choice to use one drug instead of another due to:
 - perceived safety; level of addiction potential; effectiveness in relieving symptoms; access and level of acceptance.
- **Harm reduction**
 - Public Health approach aimed at reducing the harms associated with using a particular substance or activity (ex/condoms, seat belts)
 - Reduction in harm is the goal above and beyond abstinence

Research on substitution

- Economic substitution in illicit drug research (Pacula, 1998)
- Cannabis as a treatment for alcoholism (Mikuriya, 1970, 2001, 2004)
- Increased interest in cannabis as a substitute for prescription drugs:
 - Increase in dependence on prescription drugs
 - More individuals using multiple medications over long periods of time.

Studying substitution with a medical cannabis patient sample

- Regular users with a stable supply
- access to cannabis not granted under a standardized prescription system
- still legitimized by a doctor's recommendation (self-medication)

Medical cannabis patients and substitution

- Reiman (2007) study of 130 medical cannabis patients
 - 19% reported previous alcohol treatment
 - 50% reported using cannabis as a substitute for alcohol
 - 47% reported using cannabis as a substitute for illicit drugs
 - 74% reported using cannabis as a substitute for prescription drugs

Berkeley Patient's Group Study

- N=350 anonymous patient surveys collected at Berkeley Patient's Group in Berkeley, CA
 - 68% male; 54% single; 66% White
 - mean age was 39
 - 74% have health insurance (including Medical)
 - 41% work full time, 81% have completed at least some college, 55% make less than \$40,000 a year
- 46% use cannabis 2-3 times per day
- 35% use 3-5 grams per week
- 69% report no change in their cannabis use over the past 6 months

Berkeley Patient's Group Study

- 53% currently drink alcohol, 2.6 was the average number of drinking days per week, 2.9 was the average number of drinks on a drinking occasion
- 25% currently use tobacco, 9.5 is the average number of cigarettes smoked daily
- 11% have used a non-prescribed, non OTC drug in the past 30 days with cocaine, MDMA and Vicodin reported most frequently

Berkeley Patients Group Study

- 71% report having a chronic medical condition
- 52% use cannabis for a pain related condition
- 75% use cannabis for a mental health issue
- 64% need ongoing treatment in addition to cannabis
- 85% report cannabis has less unwanted side effects than their other treatment
- 88% report that cannabis makes their symptoms much better.

Berkeley Patients Group Study

- 40% have used cannabis as a substitute for alcohol
- 26% as a substitute for illicit drugs
- 66% as a substitute for prescription drugs
- The most common reasons given for substituting were
 - less adverse side effects (65%)
 - better symptom management (57%)
 - less withdrawal potential with cannabis (34%)

Conclusions

- High occurrence of chronic illness among medical cannabis patients
- Most patients are using cannabis in conjunction with another treatment
- Most patients report that cannabis is more effective than their other treatments
- Over half of patients report using cannabis as a substitute for prescription drugs, claiming better effectiveness, less unwanted side effects and less withdrawal potential from cannabis