

# Does Medical Cannabis Reduce Opioid Dependency

PICO: In adults experiencing opioid dependency, does using medical cannabis compare to conventional FDA-approved therapies in treating opioid use disorder?

## Background/Significance

- The opioid crisis has become an increasingly urgent problem with an estimated 26 - 36 million people worldwide abusing opioids.
- CDC estimates that 115 people die every day in the U.S. from an opioid-related cause and more than 33,000 people died in 2015 as a result of an unintentional opioid overdose.
- FDA-approved replacement therapies help with symptoms of opioid withdrawal and decrease relapse but are not risk-free and are not effective for all patients.
- Emerging evidence suggests that cannabis may play an important role in reducing the impact of opioid use disorder.

## Analysis

- Despite the rising epidemic of opioid use, there are three FDA-approved medications available for treatment of opioid use disorder including Methadone, Buprenorphine, and Naltrexone.
- Effective at managing symptoms, the current treatments for opioid use disorder fall short when it comes to their serious and unpleasant side effects in addition to their limited accessibility.
- The shortcomings of current available medications open the door for research on additional first line analgesics.

## Results

- Cannabis in the medical field is a newer topic so the availability of information was of concern. Searches were done using the following databases: Embase, CINAHL, PubMed and Scopus, and resulted in an adequate number of articles.
- In states where cannabis is medically legal, research suggests that cannabis might be used by individuals as an analgesic alternative to prescribed opioid use.
- There is a deficiency in evidence and research available to support the supplemental use of cannabis and its potential role in improving an individual's treatment outcome.

## Barriers and Implications of Proposed Use of Cannabis

- One of the problems that has been theorized when considering using cannabis as an alternative to opioid use, is that it will lead to cannabis use disorder.
- It has also been identified that an increase in the risk of cannabis use disorder is usually correlated to using higher concentrations of THC.
- Overall, research suggests that the benefits of cannabis in conjunction with opioid antagonists could be effective in reducing the risk of developing cannabis use disorder, as well as reducing opioid use disorder.



## Summary/Conclusion

- Addiction rates, morbidity and mortality have been reduced when opioid dependent individuals change to marijuana use as an alternative pain killer.
- While drugs such as Methadone can decrease opioid cravings by blocking neurotransmitters that produce the euphoric effect, there is still an increased risk for dependence.
- Research is limited, we did not find any quality primary literature that reported on medical cannabis as an effective treatment for the reduction in uses of addictive substances, but there is ongoing evaluation on the subject.

## Recommendations

- Despite limited research on how cannabis use can benefit opioid dependent individuals, thus far it has been shown that cannabis does reduce anxiety and pain associated with opioid withdrawal.
- Evidence-based opioid prescription and cannabis recommendation practices should be an important component of continuing education and included in curriculum for new health care providers so clinicians can continue to uphold their Hippocratic oath.
- Extended research would allow RN's, NPs, and PA's to offer medical cannabis as an alternative to addictive and abused opioids.