Older Adults Increasingly Use Medical Marijuana for Nausea, Pain
It's still controversial, even where it's legal
by Peter Jane | From: AARP Bulletin | October 30, 2010

To date, 14 states and the District of Columbia have legalized medical marijuana. And it's no surprise that some of the most impassioned advocates for access are seniors. Many of the purported health benefits of marijuana target problems that typically plague older people, such as chronic shingles, arthritis pain, loss of appetite and symptoms of multiple sclerosis.

Pot for pain
Researchers acknowledge that they've only beginning to study medical applications of marijuana. "But what we already know suggests that the active compounds in marijuana have tremendous potential," says Mark Ware, M.D., a researcher at McGill University in Montreal and executive director of the Canadian Consortium for the Investigation of Cannabinoids.

Cells throughout the body, he explains, possess receptors for cannabinoids, the active ingredients in marijuana. Interestingly, our bodies produce natural cannabinoids, which are believed to play a role in controlling nerve impulses, immune function and even bone growth. The existence of this naturally occurring system explains why marijuana, by delivering a potent dose of cannabinoids, has far-ranging effects, Ware says.

Among the best-studied benefits are pain control and nausea relief. "Marijuana appears to be particularly effective at easing pain related to nerve damage, or neuropathy," says Stephen Yarnitsky, professor of neurology and behavior at Stony Brook University in New York. Neuropathy is a common complication of diabetes, cancer therapies and herpes zoster infections, or shingles. Marijuana has also been shown to help restore appetite, which can be zapped by cancer treatments. There's emerging evidence that cannabis helps control spastic muscle contractions associated with multiple sclerosis. It may also slow the course of the devastating degenerative disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease.

Mainstream medical support
Mainstream medical organizations have acknowledged marijuana's promise. In 2008, the American College of Physicians released a position statement arguing that promising results from small studies should be an impetus to more research into the health effects of marijuana. A 2009 interim report issued by the American Medical Association also urged more research, pointing to a variety of health benefits.

This isn't the first time the AMA has argued in favor of marijuana. Cannabis was commonly used for medicinal purposes in the United States until 1937, when the weed was declared an illegal substance by the federal government — despite the AMA's objections at the time.
One reason researchers don't know more about marijuana's potential benefits today is that the federal Controlled Substances Act still classifies marijuana as a Schedule I drug, a category reserved for dangerous drugs with a high potential for abuse and 'no currently accepted medical use.'

Many researchers dispute both parts of that description. There's growing evidence for medical uses of the weed, they insist. "And when people use it medicinally, there's very little reason to think it leads to abuse," says Yuzella. "No one has ever died from using marijuana, as far as we know."

But as long as marijuana remains a Schedule I drug, researchers face enormous hurdles in winning approval to conduct research. "It's a real catch-22," says Dane Hoffman, an expert on medical marijuana laws at the University of Maryland School of Law in Baltimore. "Because marijuana is a Schedule I drug, it's very difficult to do the research required to move it to Schedule II."

Conflicting state and federal laws, meanwhile, have created a legal landscape fraught with uncertainties. Despite laws in some states making medicinal marijuana legal, cultivating and using marijuana remains a federal offense. In 2009, the Justice Department announced that federal resources would not be used to enforce the law against medicinal marijuana. "But that's a matter of enforcement," says Hoffman. "It doesn't change the law." The federal government can always reverse course and begin cracking down, she points out, even in states that have legalized marijuana.

DavidBriggs
5:44 PM on November 2, 2010
This is a fantastic article.
I am so glad that people have opened their minds and begun moving beyond the lies propagated by Rysinger. I hope to see more articles on medical marijuana and the medicinal efficacy of cannablas.

Mailman451
6:30 PM on November 1, 2010
Why don't they leave us with the constitutional right of pursuit of happiness?

slickly
3:02 PM on November 1, 2010
It's great to see so many comments supporting the legalization of medical marijuana. To ban it is just plain cruel to people in pain. And as many users have testified, marijuana is more effective and less debilitating than expensive prescription painkillers (which can be equally if not more addictive than marijuana used for medical reasons).
Good for the AARP Bulletin for illuminating this controversial issue with actual facts and the experiences of real people.

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