

The Benefits of Medical Marijuana for Chronic Pain Sufferers

Cannabis, otherwise known as marijuana (or marihuana), has been a topic of debate for many years, not only in Canada, but also in several other countries including the U.S. and the U.K. However, while marijuana for recreational use has not been legalized in Canada, medical marijuana use *can* be granted for medical needs such as grave or debilitating illnesses.

The Definition of Chronic Pain

Although “chronic pain” seems all encompassing and thus easily used as a reason for medical marijuana use, the organization of Health Canada very clearly defines what can be considered severe enough pain for medical marijuana. With that said, there are many suffering from chronic pain - due to a variety of reasons – with grants for the medical use of cannabis.

Arthritis, headaches and back pain are the most common, but fibromyalgia, carpal tunnel syndrome, neuropathy and phantom limb pain are also common reason for chronic pain. Continuing pain can also be caused by debilitating illnesses such as MS (multiple sclerosis), scoliosis, osteoporosis and others.

Original Treatments for Chronic Pain

For many, medical marijuana use is a “last resort”, used only after several pharmacologic treatments fail. Typically, the first treatments include pain relievers such as aspirin or ibuprofen. Unfortunately, long-term use can cause serious side effects; even if there is pain relief, it can only be in short periods due to the need for short-term use of the “first line” of treatments.

Should the first treatments fail, narcotic opioids such as codeine, morphine and oxycodone are generally prescribed. Although often highly affective, the concern for these types of narcotics is that they have a high possibility for addiction and abuse. As well, their use is also limited, due to possible side effects in higher doses. The withdrawal symptoms for addictive pharmaceuticals can be mild to painfully severe.

Medical Marijuana for Chronic Pain

For those that don't respond to the first or second line of treatments, medical marijuana may be prescribed. As well, there are those who prefer not to use man-made pharmaceuticals that have a high rate of

addiction or serious side effects. Although a few find cannabis to be addictive, the withdrawal symptoms are mild.

According to Health Canada, "Dependence is unlikely to be problematic when cannabis is used therapeutically, although withdrawal affects may be uncomfortable. These include restlessness, anxiety, mild agitation, irritability, tremor, insomnia and EEG/ sleep disturbance, nausea, diarrhea and cramping."

Relief from chronic pain, however, far outweighs the possibility of addiction for many:

- **Migraines** – Severe, incredibly painful and often lasting as long as 72 hours, migraines can cause serious debilitating issues such as nausea, vision changes, vomiting and a high sensitivity to light and sound. Many of the pharmaceuticals used to either stop or lessen the amount of migraines cause the same issues as the onset of the migraines themselves. Often, sufferers stop treatment because it doesn't work or because the side effects are too severe.

Medical marijuana, on the other hand, has been a well-documented treatment for many years – even throughout the nineteenth century. Cannabinoids have often demonstrated anti-inflammatory effects, as well as dopamine blocking. It is believed by some that one of the causes of migraines is the *lack* of natural endocannabinoids in the body, which might explain why cannabis works to decrease the pain as well as the symptoms. [1]

- **Multiple sclerosis (MS)** – MS is a degenerative disease that attacks myelin in the brain and spinal cord. If you imagine nerves to be like electrical wires, myelin is the insulating, protective sheath around the nerves. The autoimmune system treats myelin as a foreign invader, destroying patches of it and leaving nerve fibers exposed, interrupting their normal function. It is debilitating and painful, causing such symptoms as tingling and numbness, painful muscle spasms, tremors, paralysis and more.

Prescribed pharmaceuticals can cause severe, debilitating medical issues such as seizures, abdominal cramps, dizziness, mental disturbances and other problems. Many MS sufferers prefer to self-medicate with marijuana, and have noticed that

cannabis helps them control tremors, spasms and bladder control. Tests have also shown that THC helps reduce pain intensity and sleep disturbance significantly.

Although these two illnesses are common for the use of medical marijuana in relieving chronic pain sufferers, the same can be said for rheumatoid arthritis, spinal cord injuries and even phantom limb pain. While more studies need to be performed to explain exactly how cannabinoids and medical marijuana work, the fact that they *do* work is clear.

[1] - <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15159679?dopt=Abstract>