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Cannabis-Based Dronabinol May Revolutionize Alzheimer's Care

Study Reveals Dronabinol, a Synthetic THC, Decreases Agitation in Alzheimer's Patients by 30%

A recent study has shown that dronabinol, a synthetic form of THC (the psychoactive compound found in cannabis), significantly reduces agitation in Alzheimer's patients. Presented at the International Psychogeriatric Association conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the findings indicate that dronabinol can decrease symptoms of agitation by 30%, offering a potentially transformative alternative to existing treatments, *Earth.com* reported.

Understanding Agitation in Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's disease, the most common neurodegenerative disorder in the U.S., affects approximately 6.7 million people aged 65 and older. By 2060, experts predict this number will climb to 13.8 million. One of the most distressing and difficult-to-manage symptoms of Alzheimer's is agitation, which impacts nearly 40% of patients. Agitation can manifest as excessive physical movements, verbal outbursts, and even aggressive behaviors, making it a challenging symptom for both patients and caregivers to manage.

"Agitation is one of the most distressing symptoms of Alzheimer's dementia, and we are pleased to make positive strides forward in treatment of these patients," said Dr. Paul Rosenberg, professor at Johns Hopkins University and co-principal investigator of the study.

Examining the Treatment

Current treatments for agitation often involve the use of antipsychotic medications, which can bring about severe side effects, such as delirium, increased fall risk, and seizures. The need for safer, more effective treatments has prompted researchers to explore alternative therapies like dronabinol, which mimics the effects of THC in a controlled, synthetic form.

In this clinical trial, 75 patients experiencing severe agitation due to Alzheimer's disease were recruited from five different sites, including 35 patients admitted to Johns Hopkins Hospital between March 2017 and May 2024. To qualify for the study, participants had to exhibit notable symptoms of agitation for at least two weeks.

Participants were randomly divided into two groups: one group received five milligrams of dronabinol in pill form twice daily, while the other group received a placebo. The treatment period lasted three weeks, during which researchers closely monitored changes in agitation levels.

The results were promising. Patients who received dronabinol experienced a significant reduction in agitation symptoms, with their Pittsburgh Agitation Scale (PAS) scores dropping from an average of 9.68 to 7.26 —

representing a 30% decrease. In contrast, the placebo group showed no measurable improvement in agitation.

Impact on Caregivers

The study highlights not only the benefits for patients but also the potential relief for caregivers. Agitation in Alzheimer's patients is a major source of stress for caregivers and can often lead to emergency room visits and the need for long-term care placements. Dr. Brent Forester, chairman of the Department of Psychiatry at Tufts Medical Center and co-principal investigator of the study, emphasized the toll that agitation takes on caregivers.

"It is the agitation, not the memory loss, that often drives individuals with dementia to the emergency department and long-term care facilities," Forester explained. He noted that the use of dronabinol could ease the burden on caregivers, improve patient outcomes, and potentially reduce overall healthcare costs.

A Promising Step Forward

The study's findings offer hope for Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers, suggesting that dronabinol could serve as a safer, more effective alternative to traditional antipsychotic treatments. By addressing agitation without the severe side effects associated with current medications, dronabinol could improve quality of life for both patients and their families.

As Alzheimer's cases are expected to rise dramatically in the coming decades, effective treatments for symptoms like agitation will be crucial. With these promising results, dronabinol may represent an important step toward better management of one of the most challenging aspects of Alzheimer's disease. Researchers plan to continue studying its potential and hope to see further clinical applications in the near future.

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