

FDA Educates Healthcare Pros on Cannabis and Cannabinoids

FDA Hosts Cannabis Webinar, Discusses Hemp and Cannabis Differences Amid Federal Rescheduling Talks

Federal officials from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) conducted a webinar this week addressing key topics around cannabis, its uses, and regulatory challenges. The webinar covered the plant's chemical structure, differences between marijuana and hemp, and the clinical impacts of cannabinoids. Hosted by the FDA's Division of Drug Information within the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research (CDER), the event was aimed at educating healthcare professionals, such as physicians, pharmacists, and public health officials, about cannabis science and regulation.

This session comes as the federal government considers rescheduling cannabis, potentially moving it from Schedule I to Schedule III under the Controlled Substances Act (CSA), which would open doors for certain FDA-approved medical cannabis products.

Webinar Overview: Cannabis Basics and Safety Concerns

The FDA's webinar is part of its Drug Topics series, an educational initiative for healthcare providers to better understand emerging drug trends. During Tuesday's session, speakers reviewed cannabis plant species, their chemical makeup, and the varying effects of hemp and marijuana products. Cassandra Taylor, a public health advisor with the FDA, emphasized that hemp products, which can legally cross state lines, contrast significantly from marijuana, which remains confined to state markets where it's legal.

"Because hemp-derived products are part of interstate markets, tracking and regulating them has proven challenging," Taylor said, pointing out the public health risks associated with underregulated products crossing state lines. The FDA presentation also highlighted the potential drug interactions linked to cannabinoids and included insights into FDA programs that track adverse health events related to cannabis products.

The Federal Rescheduling Proposal and Medical Cannabis Access

With the Biden administration's proposal to reschedule marijuana, the webinar addressed potential changes this move could bring. Reclassifying marijuana from Schedule I to Schedule III would reduce legal restrictions, enabling FDA-approved medical marijuana treatments to enter the market. Medical cannabis could then be available in a broader setting for therapeutic purposes, while more research into marijuana's effects could be conducted without the current regulatory constraints.

This shift is eagerly anticipated by healthcare professionals, many of whom feel unprepared to address cannabis-related inquiries from patients, particularly given that medical marijuana programs exist in many states. Despite legalization at the state level, U.S. doctors often lack the formal guidance or information on

cannabis' medical efficacy, safety, or risks.

Challenges of Hemp-Derived Cannabinoids and Legal Loopholes

A primary focus of the session was the complications posed by hemp-derived cannabinoids, such as delta-8 THC, which are legal under the 2018 Farm Bill yet controversial due to their psychoactive effects. These cannabinoids have created legal gray areas that make regulatory oversight difficult. In recent months, Congress has been evaluating legislation to address this issue, such as Rep. Mary Miller's (R-IL) amendment to the upcoming 2024 Farm Bill. This amendment seeks to exclude "synthesized" cannabinoids from the definition of legal hemp, thus closing the legal loophole that allows delta-8 and similar cannabinoids to be sold nationwide.

This regulation has seen bipartisan support, as prohibitionist groups and even some marijuana companies argue that such cannabinoids circumvent intended hemp legislation. "Regulating semi-synthetic cannabinoids will not work," some argue, advocating for an outright ban to prevent further public health risks.

Congressional and Legal Action on Hemp-Derived Products

FDA officials also discussed how federal oversight intersects with state cannabis laws. The agency's hands-off approach to enforcement is evolving, with recent interventions including collaborating with local law enforcement. In 2022, the FDA and Hawaii law enforcement worked together on a surveillance project targeting an unlicensed hemp business, resulting in two arrests.

Additional legislative efforts include a provision within the House Appropriations Committee's recent spending bill that aims to restrict THC levels in hemp-derived products to zero quantifiable amounts. Proponents say this change would close the gap that allows intoxicating compounds like delta-8 to thrive, despite often evading state cannabis regulations. However, court rulings continue to uphold the legality of certain hemp-derived cannabinoids, as evidenced by a recent appeals court decision affirming that compounds like THC-O-acetate are federally legal under the 2018 Farm Bill.

Implications for the Cannabis Industry and Healthcare Providers

The FDA's educational efforts come at a time when healthcare providers and lawmakers alike are pushing for clarity on cannabis' health implications and its safe use. Legislation such as Rep. Morgan Griffith's (R-VA) proposal would make it mandatory for the FDA to regulate hemp-derived cannabinoids like CBD, after the agency deferred from developing regulations independently.

Further developments are happening on the state level as well, such as California Governor Gavin Newsom's (D) recent efforts to curb the spread of hemp-derived products that contain intoxicating compounds. Some proponents support these restrictions, while critics argue they could hinder access to federally legal CBD products that are popular among consumers.

Growing Acceptance of Cannabinoid Products and FDA Oversight

As consumer interest in cannabis products rises, federal and state agencies are increasingly called upon to ensure safety standards. The FDA has stated it has the authority to remove cannabis-infused foods and drinks from the market but rarely takes enforcement action, often leaving such duties to state health officials. In one instance last year, consumer complaints about Minnesota-based Northland Vapor's delta-8 THC products led to a lawsuit, highlighting the role of FDA surveillance in protecting public health.

The FDA's webinar is part of an ongoing conversation as cannabis becomes more integrated into mainstream health and wellness. With potential federal rescheduling on the horizon, the agency continues to emphasize that regulatory consistency and safety protocols will be key to ensuring that patients and consumers can safely navigate the expanding cannabis market.

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