

Medical Cannabis Laws Linked to Rise in Cannabis Use Disorders

Study Links Medical Cannabis Laws to Increased Cannabis Use Disorders and Poisoning

A recent study published in *JAMA Psychiatry* on December 23 reveals significant findings about the impact of cannabis laws on public health. Researchers, led by Jayani Jayawardhana, Ph.D., from the University of Kentucky's College of Public Health, examined the connection between state-level cannabis laws and the rates of cannabis use disorder (CUD) and cannabis poisoning over a 10-year period, spanning from January 2011 to December 2021.

The study included over 110 million enrollees across all 50 states and the District of Columbia, focusing on adults aged 18 to 64. The researchers aimed to investigate how medical cannabis laws (MCLs) and recreational cannabis laws (RCLs) influenced the incidence of CUD and cannabis poisoning in these populations.

Medical Cannabis Laws and Increased Health Risks

The study found that medical cannabis laws were associated with significant increases in both CUD and cannabis poisoning. Specifically, the implementation of MCLs led to an increase in CUD by 31.09 diagnoses per 100,000 enrollees per quarter and an increase in cannabis poisoning by 0.76 diagnoses per 100,000 enrollees per quarter.

This suggests that while medical cannabis has become more accessible in many states, it may contribute to an uptick in adverse health outcomes, including the development of cannabis use disorder and cannabis-related poisonings. The study noted that there was no significant association between opening medical cannabis dispensaries or allowing home cultivation of cannabis and the observed health issues.

Recreational Cannabis Laws and Poisoning

In states with recreational cannabis laws, researchers found a notable increase in cannabis poisoning. While recreational cannabis laws did not show a significant relationship with CUD, they were linked to an increase in cannabis poisoning by 0.34 diagnoses per 100,000 enrollees per quarter. This highlights the potential risks associated with increased availability and consumption of cannabis for recreational purposes, as well as the need for more effective safety measures.

Demographic Differences in Cannabis Use Disorder

The study also revealed demographic variations in the impact of MCLs on cannabis use disorder. Female enrollees and individuals aged 35 to 44 were found to experience higher relative increases in CUD in states

with MCLs compared to other groups. These findings suggest that cannabis use may have distinct effects based on gender and age, emphasizing the importance of targeted public health strategies to address these disparities.

Implications for Public Health Policy

The study's findings underscore the growing need for public health interventions in states where cannabis laws have been implemented. The researchers argue that while cannabis laws may provide benefits, such as medical relief for certain conditions, they also present public health challenges, particularly in terms of CUD and poisoning. These health issues could burden healthcare systems, making it essential to develop effective policies to mitigate these risks.

“The increases in cannabis use disorders and poisoning following the implementation of medical and recreational cannabis laws highlight the need for accompanying policy measures,” said the authors of the study. They stress the importance of combining cannabis legalization with effective treatment options for those affected by the adverse health effects of cannabis use.

The findings of this study bring to light the unintended health consequences of cannabis legalization, particularly in states that have implemented medical and recreational cannabis laws. As cannabis becomes more accessible, both for medical and recreational purposes, the incidence of cannabis use disorders and poisonings has risen, presenting challenges to healthcare systems and public health officials.

As policymakers continue to debate the benefits and risks of cannabis legalization, the study suggests that thoughtful, evidence-based strategies are essential to minimize the negative impacts of increased cannabis access. These could include enhanced education on responsible cannabis use, stricter regulations around distribution, and expanded resources for treating cannabis-related disorders.

Ultimately, while cannabis laws may offer significant benefits, especially in the medical realm, it is clear that a balanced approach—combining legalization with preventative health measures—is necessary to ensure the well-being of the public.

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