

# Study: Medical Cannabis Use Linked to Higher Disorder Risk

## Study Finds Adults Using Medical Cannabis May Have Higher Risk of Cannabis Use Disorder

A recent study published in *JAMA Psychiatry* reveals concerning findings regarding the link between medical cannabis use and cannabis use disorder (CUD). The research suggests that adults aged 18 to 49 who use cannabis for medical purposes—either exclusively or alongside nonmedical use—may face a higher prevalence of CUD compared to those who use cannabis strictly for nonmedical reasons. The study's results, published on January 22, 2025, raise questions about the potential risks of medical cannabis use, especially in adults who may be predisposed to addiction.

### Study Examines Differences in Cannabis Use and Cannabis Use Disorder Across Different Use Groups

The study, led by Beth Han, M.D., Ph.D., M.P.H., from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, aimed to explore the relationship between the frequency of cannabis use and the prevalence of cannabis use disorder among different groups of U.S. adults aged 18 to 49 years. The researchers focused on three key groups: those who used cannabis exclusively for medical purposes (medical-only use), those who used it for both medical and nonmedical purposes (medical-nonmedical use), and those who used cannabis solely for nonmedical reasons (nonmedical-only use).

Data for the study came from the 2021 to 2022 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health, which included responses from 72,668 participants. The researchers aimed to understand how these groups differed in terms of cannabis use frequency and the development of cannabis use disorder.

### Higher Prevalence of Cannabis Use Disorder Among Medical Cannabis Users

According to the study, 29.5% of respondents reported using cannabis in the past year. Of these users, 83.7% were nonmedical-only users, 9.2% used cannabis exclusively for medical purposes, and 5.7% reported using cannabis for both medical and nonmedical reasons. While the data indicates that medical cannabis use is relatively low compared to nonmedical use, the findings suggest that individuals who use cannabis for medical purposes—whether exclusively or combined with nonmedical use—are at an increased risk of developing cannabis use disorder.

The researchers found that over one-third (34.8%) of the participants exhibited signs of CUD. More alarmingly, the prevalence of mild, moderate, and severe CUD was notably higher among both men and women aged 18 to 34 years, as well as men aged 35 to 49 years, who reported medical-only or medical-nonmedical cannabis use. These groups had a higher adjusted prevalence of CUD compared to their peers who reported using cannabis for nonmedical purposes only.

### More Frequent Cannabis Use Linked to Increased Risk of Cannabis Use Disorder

One of the key findings of the study was that individuals who used cannabis for medical purposes—whether exclusively or in combination with nonmedical use—tended to use cannabis more frequently than those who only used it for nonmedical reasons. More frequent cannabis use is known to be a major risk factor for developing cannabis use disorder, which can include symptoms such as cravings, inability to control use, and withdrawal symptoms when not using cannabis. The study suggests that medical cannabis users may be at a greater risk of these negative outcomes, especially when their use pattern aligns more closely with nonmedical use behaviors.

The researchers note that this finding highlights the need for healthcare professionals to carefully evaluate the risks of addiction when recommending medical cannabis to patients. The authors stress that, while medical cannabis may be beneficial for certain health conditions, clinicians should be mindful of the potential for dependency and monitor patients closely for the emergence of CUD.

### **Experts Call for Caution in Medical Cannabis Prescriptions and Regular Monitoring**

The study's authors urge caution among clinicians when it comes to recommending medical cannabis to patients. They emphasize the importance of considering the risk of addiction and suggest that healthcare providers should monitor patients for signs of cannabis use disorder if medical cannabis is prescribed. This approach could help minimize the risk of adverse outcomes, such as dependency or worsening of existing substance use disorders, which could affect the patient's overall health and well-being.

“Clinicians should consider addiction risk before recommending medical cannabis and, if they do, should monitor for CUD emergence,” the researchers wrote. They also pointed out that while medical cannabis is often seen as a safer alternative to opioid medications for pain management, it is not without its own potential for misuse and dependency.

### **Acknowledging Potential Conflicts of Interest in Cannabis Research**

As with many studies in the rapidly evolving cannabis industry, the research was not without its conflicts of interest. One of the study's authors disclosed holding long-term stocks in companies that are relevant to the cannabis industry. While such disclosures are standard practice in scientific research, it's important for readers and policymakers to consider potential biases when interpreting the findings.

Despite this, the study's conclusions highlight a crucial issue in the ongoing debate surrounding the medical use of cannabis. While medical cannabis may offer relief for various medical conditions, it is essential to consider its potential to lead to adverse health effects, including cannabis use disorder.

### **Looking Forward: Implications for Public Health and Future Research**

The findings from this study have important implications for public health, particularly as the legal landscape surrounding cannabis continues to evolve. As more states legalize medical cannabis, it is essential to conduct further research into its long-term effects, particularly with regard to addiction and mental health. Understanding the complex relationship between medical cannabis use and cannabis use disorder will be vital for developing responsible prescribing practices and providing adequate support for individuals who may be at risk of developing dependency.

In conclusion, while cannabis may offer therapeutic benefits for certain conditions, this study underscores the importance of cautious and well-monitored use, particularly for adults who may be more vulnerable to developing cannabis use disorder. As medical cannabis continues to gain popularity, healthcare providers must stay informed about the risks and ensure that their patients are receiving the necessary care and support to prevent addiction.

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