

# Canadian Cannabis Use Rises Slightly Amid Legalization

## Modest Rise in Cannabis Use Frequency Paired With Decrease in Misuse Among Canadian Adults Following Five Years of Legalization, McMaster University Study Finds

*Longitudinal Research Highlights That Frequent Users Pre-Legalization Showed the Greatest Reductions in Cannabis Misuse and Use Frequency*

*Hamilton, ON* — A comprehensive five-year study led by researchers at McMaster University has revealed a slight increase in cannabis use frequency alongside a concurrent decline in cannabis misuse among adults in Canada since recreational cannabis legalization took effect in October 2018. The findings, published in *JAMA Network Open*, offer new insights into how legalization has influenced cannabis consumption patterns and problematic use across a diverse adult population.

### Public Concerns Over Legalization's Impact on Cannabis Use and Misuse

When Canada legalized recreational cannabis in late 2018, public debate was marked by concerns that broader access, expanding product varieties, and reduced perceived risks might fuel substantial increases in cannabis consumption and related harms. Prior research on legalization impacts, especially from the United States, had produced mixed results, with some studies suggesting significant rises in use and misuse among older adults, while others attributed growing consumption trends to broader societal shifts independent of legal changes.

### Methodology: Prospective Cohort Study Tracking Cannabis Behavior Over Five Years

To provide clearer answers, the McMaster team conducted a prospective cohort study involving 1,428 Ontario residents aged 18 to 65 years. Participants, recruited from a research registry at St Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, completed biannual online surveys from September 2018 through October 2023 assessing cannabis use frequency and misuse.

Use frequency was measured as the percentage of days cannabis was consumed over the prior six months. Misuse was evaluated using an eight-item questionnaire designed to capture problematic use markers, including dependence, impaired control, and negative consequences. Additional analyses tracked shifts in preferred cannabis product types over time.

### Key Findings: Slight Increase in Use Frequency and Reduction in Misuse Over Time

The study identified an annual increase of 0.35% in the proportion of days cannabis was used, accumulating to a 1.75% rise over five years. Meanwhile, misuse scores steadily declined by 0.08 points per year,

amounting to a 0.4 point reduction overall. Notably, reductions in misuse became most pronounced following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Baseline use frequency was a significant factor in behavioral changes: frequent users prior to legalization demonstrated the largest decreases in both cannabis use frequency and misuse, while occasional users and those who had not used cannabis previously showed modest increases in consumption without a parallel rise in misuse.

## **Changing Consumer Preferences Reflect Broader Market Trends**

The research also documented evolving consumer preferences within the legal cannabis market. Early in the study period, dried flower, hashish, and concentrates were the dominant product types. Over time, users increasingly favored edibles, liquids, and vape pens, reflecting greater product diversity and shifts toward potentially less harmful consumption methods.

## **Implications: Legalization Linked to Modest Use Increases and Safer Use Patterns**

The McMaster study's findings suggest that while recreational cannabis legalization in Canada has led to a small increase in overall use frequency, it has also coincided with improvements in use behavior and reductions in misuse. These outcomes provide some reassurance that fears of dramatic surges in cannabis-related harms may have been overstated.

Researchers emphasize the importance of continued long-term monitoring to fully understand legalization's impacts, particularly as market dynamics and regulatory frameworks evolve.

## **Conclusion: Balanced Outcomes Highlight the Nuanced Effects of Cannabis Legalization in Canada**

By tracking a diverse adult cohort over five years, this study contributes valuable evidence indicating that Canada's legalization approach may support safer cannabis consumption patterns even as use rises modestly. The differentiated experiences of frequent versus occasional users underscore the complexity of legalization's effects and the need for tailored public health strategies.

As Canada continues its path as a global leader in cannabis policy innovation, ongoing research will be essential to guide effective regulation, education, and harm reduction efforts.

Email: [info@cannabisriskmanager.com](mailto:info@cannabisriskmanager.com) | Phone: +415-226-4060

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