



Arthritis and the Use of Medical Cannabis A Position Statement

our belief

The Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance (CAPA) is a grass-roots, patient-driven, independent, national not for profit organization with members from across the country. CAPA's fundamental belief is that the first expert on arthritis is the individual who lives with the disease, and who provides a unique perspective that is all too often absent.

what is the issue

People living with arthritis in Canada are prescribed many different types of medications, all of which are approved by Health Canada for use to treat the symptoms of their disease. All medications have the potential for serious side effects, including putting patients at risk for long-term dependency. It is well documented that accessing treatment for severe long term chronic pain can be a significant challenge for patients as insufficient resources have been allocated within in the Canadian health care system.

Health Canada states "the courts have required reasonable access to a legal source of marijuana for medical purposes when authorized by a healthcare practitioner" (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/index-eng.php>). Medical cannabis is an additional treatment option for patients who live with arthritis, however the process to access this treatment may be unclear for patients. Many physicians are unfamiliar with medical cannabis as a treatment option and may be reluctant to recommend it to their patients as a treatment and help them obtain it. They may also cite a lack of evidence on the safety and effectiveness of medical cannabis as a treatment option. Healthcare practitioners may prescribe medical cannabis for a variety of disorders and symptoms which have not responded to conventional medical treatments, symptoms that primarily affect those living with arthritis including chronic non-cancer pain, insomnia and depressed mood associated with living with a chronic, incurable disease. This is not an exhaustive list of symptoms or conditions for which medical cannabis may be prescribed. There is an abundance of



anecdotal evidence from patients who report that they have experienced relief from their symptoms with the use of medical cannabis as well. The lack of research aside, medical cannabis is no different than any of the other drugs patients take to control symptoms of arthritis in that its benefits and risks require consideration.

what is medical cannabis

The active ingredients in medical cannabis are molecules called cannabinoids. The two major cannabinoids are Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and Cannabidiol (CBD). THC has pain-relieving properties with psychoactive properties that produce euphoric effects. CBD reduces pain and inflammation without psychoactive effects.

Health Canada states “One of the principal active ingredient[s] in cannabis (THC) acts on very specific targets found in the body known as cannabinoid receptors. Other cannabinoids, such as CBD, may also have targets other than the cannabinoid receptors. Cannabinoid receptors are found throughout the body, in most tissues and organs, but they are especially numerous in the brain and nervous system. Cannabinoid receptors are involved in the regulation of many bodily functions including: brain and nervous system activity, heart rate and blood pressure, digestion, inflammation, immune system activity, perception of pain, reproduction, wake/sleep cycle, regulation of stress and emotional state and many other functions.” (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/info/cons-eng.php>)

our position

1. There is a process in place for patients to access medical cannabis in Canada under Health Canada’s Marihuana for Medical Purposes Regulations (<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/marihuana/access-acceder-eng.php>). Patients need access to credible resources that can help them navigate this process if they have made an informed decision that medical cannabis is a treatment option they wish to pursue. Patients must be able to access medical cannabis without stigma if this is a treatment they have chosen to help alleviate their arthritis symptoms and control their arthritis in attempts to achieve a better quality of life. Often medical cannabis is only considered as a potential option after patients have failed other conventional treatments.
2. More research is required to better understand the safety and effectiveness of using medical cannabis for the treatment of arthritis. Patients and their physicians must be

able to make an informed decision about whether or not medical cannabis is a treatment option. Research needs to include the patient voice through engaging patients as research partners and collaborators, which will allow for the measurement of patient-reported outcomes.

3. As with any medication, there are both benefits and risks of using medical cannabis as a treatment for arthritis. Weighing these benefits and risks is an individual decision to be made based on an informed conversation between a patient and their healthcare provider. Healthcare providers should have access to the training they require to be able to effectively prescribe medical cannabis as a treatment for their patient(s).