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Incidence and predictors of the initiation of cannabis use among gay and bisexual men

Background: Drug use among gay and bisexual men (GBM) is higher than in other populations and has been implicated in high risk sexual behaviours. Longitudinal analysis of cannabis use initiation among GBM has rarely been reported.

Methods: Between 2014-2017, 1710 men enrolled in the Flux cohort study of drug use among GBM; by Dec 2017, 1273 men reported their drug use during at least one follow-up survey round. We identified incident rates and factors predicting the initiation of cannabis use at follow-up.

Results: Mean age was 34.9 years and 34.1% reported that half or more of their gay friends used drugs. 25.5% of men never used cannabis, either prior to or during the study. At baseline 32.8% reported cannabis use in the previous six months. During 24 months of follow-up: 26.4% reported continuous use, 10.8% ceased use at follow-up and did not re-commence, and 4.4% initiated use. By 24 months follow-up, 1.4% reported evidence of cannabis dependence.

Men who initiated cannabis use were younger (HR 0.96; 95%CI 0.93-0.99) and less likely to report using drugs for sex (HR 0.98; 95%CI 0.97-0.99). Initiation of cannabis use at follow-up was not associated with: sexual risk behaviors at baseline, mental health, social engagement with gay men, or use of other drugs.

Conclusion: Initiation of cannabis use is common among young GBM. In contrast to use of most other illicit drugs among GBM, men did not appear to use cannabis to enhance their sexual experiences. Few men appeared to be dependent users of cannabis.