

How many people use cannabis for medicinal reasons in Australia?

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Introduction and Aims: To estimate the prevalence and correlates of cannabis use for medicinal purposes in Australia three years after Australians had legal access.

Design and Methods: This is a cross-sectional study of included 22,015 respondents aged 14 or above who participated in the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey. Participants self-reported cannabis use in the last 12 months for medicinal purposes only, both medical/recreational reasons, or recreationally only. Those who reported medicinal use were asked if it was prescribed by a doctor. Prevalence estimates were weighted, and multinomial logistic regression examined the correlates of medicinal cannabis use.

Results: The prevalence of medicinal cannabis use was 2.6% [95%CI 2.4-2.9], with 0.8% [0.6-1.0] (prevalence case=164k [129-199k]) reporting use solely for medicinal reasons. 95.9% had no prescription. Cancer was associated with medicinal use only (OR=4.19 [1.42-12.41]), and chronic pain was associated with both medicinal use only (OR=11.02 [6.39-19.02]) or both medicinal/recreational use (OR=4.84 [3.29-7.11]).

Discussions and Conclusions: Three years after the legalization of medical cannabis in Australia, a minority of persons self-reported medicinal cannabis use. Many were getting their cannabis from illicit sources, which raises concerns for the effectiveness of the medicinal cannabis scheme in Australia, as well as quality and safety issues. Interests from patients who had cancer and chronic pain suggest a need for research on the therapeutic use of cannabis such as efficacy, effective doses, co-use of other medications, and safety in these health areas. Future research to monitor trends and long-term outcomes are warranted.

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