

because you asked

Prescribed marijuana

When can it benefit and will my doctor help me access it?

Dr. John Goodhew responds: When the Government of Canada started to recognize marijuana's role as a therapeutic product in the 1990s, its Medical Marijuana Access Regulations (MMAR) put physicians in the position of deciding whether or not a patient should be able to legally use marijuana for treatment.

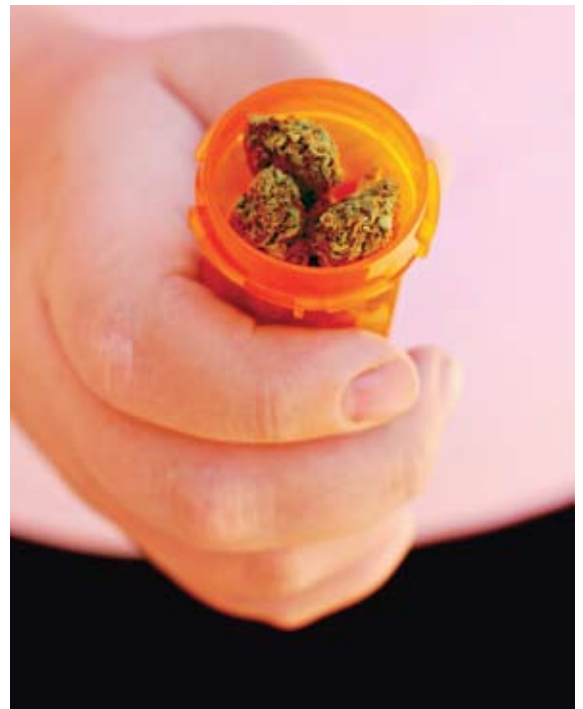
There's a general consensus among physicians that marijuana is effective in treating nausea, loss of appetite and pain. Where physicians might disagree is on whether or not these therapeutic benefits are justifiable in light of marijuana's other known effects.

Legal access

To qualify for legal access to marijuana under the MMAR, a person with HIV must have one or more of the following symptoms: severe pain, loss of appetite, weight loss and/or severe nausea. They must have tried all standard medical therapies first and found them to be either ineffective or not tolerated. Once these conditions have been met, it's then up to the physician's discretion whether or not to support a patient's MMAR application.

The provincial organizations that regulate the medical profession have all stated that physicians are under no legal or ethical obligation to approve marijuana for medicinal use — even if the MMAR criteria have been met. (Doctors in Québec, however, are actually advised by their professional College not to prescribe medical marijuana.) You may encounter a range of different attitudes. Some doctors may be concerned over the harmful effects of marijuana, such as lung disease and the possibility of addiction, or feel inappropriate acting as gatekeepers for what they see as essentially a recreational drug, or they may have moral or religious objections. Others have no problem with the idea of marijuana as medicine and most are somewhere in between.

It's important to work through the process in a respectful and honest manner, understanding that your physician's reluctance is often based on concern for your overall well-being. It's essential to



detail the symptoms for which you are seeking help. You must be willing to try the medical alternatives suggested by your physician, and to report back honestly on whether or not they were effective. Your physician will feel more comfortable considering marijuana if the alternatives were given a fair try.

If your physician won't help you with the MMAR and you live in a large city, you could go to a marijuana buyers' club or "compassion club." These organizations exist in a legal grey zone. Though technically illegal, they often have an informal arrangement with the local municipal government and the police. As long as they are only selling to people with documented medical conditions, the police in some municipalities generally seem willing to let them operate. (In Québec, police have not been so tolerant). To become a member, your physician writes a note stating your diagnosis of HIV and your specific problem, such as low appetite. This can be a one sentence handwritten note, and since no mention of marijuana is required, it's hard to imagine any physician refusing to provide this documentation.

Remember, though, that possession of marijuana obtained at a compassion club is still illegal.

John Goodhew, MD, practises at the Medical and Naturopathic Clinic in downtown Toronto

Pierre Côté, MD, is a general practitioner at the Clinique Médicale du Quartier Latin, and at the Unité hospitalière de recherche, d'enseignement et de soins sur le sida (UHRESS) at Montreal's Hôpital Saint-Luc. He is President of the Programme national de mentorat sur le VIH-SIDA, a continuing medical education program for doctors, pharmacists and nurses involved in caring for people with HIV in Québec.



Drinking and health

Are there any real dangers with alcohol?

Dr. Pierre Côté answers: There are three areas of concern with alcohol: its effect on how you act, its effect on your liver and possible interactions with medications. Of course, the amount you drink is a crucial factor in what dangers alcohol presents.

Light to moderate drinking brings very few risks and some believe even has benefits to health. Moderate drinking is defined as anything up to about two drinks a day (14 per week) for men and one drink a day (nine per week) for women. A drink is a regular beer, small glass of wine, or 1.5 ounce (45 ml) shot of liquor.

Behaviour

While moderate drinking is unlikely to affect your behaviour, excessive drinking can lead you to take risks you wouldn't otherwise, and can make you forget to take your antiretroviral medications (ARVs) at the right time. This, of course, can compromise the effectiveness of treatment and lead to the development of drug resistance. There's some idea that excessive alcohol reduces the immune response, but it's been difficult for researchers to separate the direct effect of alcohol on drug metabolism from indirect effects such as reduced adherence.

Your liver

There are some situations in which excessive drinking is riskier. If you have hepatitis C, drinking can speed up the process of scarring (cirrhosis) in your liver and increase the chances of liver cancer. This risk is well established for heavy drinking, but not quite so confirmed for light or moderate drinking. HIV treatment also becomes more complicated when the liver isn't working well.

Alcohol can affect the amount of some ARVs in the bloodstream, but most of these will not have noticeable effects. Alcohol increases the amount of abacavir (Ziagen®) in your blood and puts you at higher risk for side effects, and the combination of alcohol and ddl (Videx®) can increase the risk of pancreatitis. The cholesterol increases seen with some anti-HIV drugs can be made worse by heavy drinking.

Non-ARV drugs used to treat infections that can occur with HIV can interact with alcohol. If you are taking metronidazole (Flagyl®), alcohol should be avoided completely as it can make you quite ill. Medications used to treat tuberculosis, as well as some antibiotics, may lose their effectiveness with alcohol.

Other dangers

Neurocognitive (brain function) problems are more likely to develop among heavy drinkers. This is seen in people with and without HIV. It's also important to remember that alcohol is a depressive drug and can make psychological or emotional problems worse.

Malnutrition can become a problem with heavy drinking, as you may eat less as a result. Diarrhea is a common side effect of alcohol, especially beer. Alcohol can cause vomiting. Diarrhea and/or vomiting can result in your ARVs not being absorbed and hence, not working properly.

If alcohol leads you to act in inappropriate or risky ways, or to forget bits of your life, talk to your treatment team about getting help to keep your drinking under control. **R**

