

Can therapeutic cannabis support active aging?

The Be Wise — Cannabis and Older Adults booklet is a resource to help older adults make wise decisions about cannabis use. Health Canada allowed cannabis use for medical purposes in 2001. Since legalization in 2017, cannabis use among older Canadians has increased faster than it has for any other age group. Fifty-two percent of older Canadians report that they use it mainly for medical reasons.¹

Active Aging Canada wanted to know how cannabis can help to promote active, healthy aging. That led us to ask older adults what was keeping them from a high quality of life and from being physically active. Was it pain? Anxiety or depression? Poor sleep? And we wanted to know what the research says about using cannabis for these conditions.

How does cannabis work?

Cannabis is any product that comes from the cannabis plant. The active compounds are THC and CBD. These compounds are similar to naturally occurring compounds in the human body's endocannabinoid system. This system has receptors throughout the body. It is thought to impact the nervous system, immune function, mood and appetite, and other body functions. For that reason, cannabis has the potential to relieve a variety of ailments that come with getting older.

An example: Cannabis and arthritis

The most common types of disability among Canadian older adults are pain, mobility, and flexibility. Pain due to arthritis is one of the main reasons older adults may think about using cannabis. Osteoarthritis is one of the most common chronic conditions affecting many older Canadians. The symptoms can be caused by damage to the joint, inflammation, or nerve damage.

There are endocannabinoid receptors in joints, and cannabis has anti-inflammatory properties. The theory is that maybe cannabis could reduce nerve pain from osteoarthritis. Some older adults

report that the CBD in cannabis helps them manage pain and be more active. While research studies in animals look promising, there are no studies in humans yet.²

In Canada, the Arthritis Society of Canada recognizes the need for medical cannabis research. Canadians with arthritis and their physicians need this research to make informed decisions on using cannabis as a treatment. There is no standard therapeutic prescription for cannabis. The prescription must be personalized and requires some trial and error to find the right product and dose.

Want to learn more?

To find out more about what the science currently says about cannabis and age-related chronic conditions, get a copy of Active Aging Canada's Be Wise – Cannabis for Older Adults. <https://www.activeagingcanada.ca/participants/projects/cannabis-and-older-adults.htm>

Resources to help with pain and stay active

The Arthritis Society's position on Medical Cannabis <https://arthritis.ca/treatment/medication/medical-cannabis>

The Arthritis Society's Life Hack YouTube playlist tips can help you navigate day to day tasks more easily. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLKAa4n_fskHLYF_ZRCuLJmHkte0IRlxKE

Active Aging Canada's tip sheet: Active Living Helps Arthritis <https://www.activeagingcanada.ca/assets/pdf/active-living-tip-sheets/active-living-helps-arthritis-2017.pdf>

Learn about the GLA:D® education and exercise program for knee and hip osteoarthritis <https://gladcanada.ca/index.php/for-participants/>

References

1. Statistics Canada. *National Cannabis Survey, Third Quarter 2019*. The Daily, Wednesday, October 30, 2019.
2. O'Brien M and Jason J McDougall *Cannabis and joints: scientific evidence for the alleviation of osteoarthritis pain by cannabinoids* Current Opinion in Pharmacology 2018, 40:104–109.