

# CANNABIS TO REDUCE OPIOIDS

Dr. Lionel Marks de Chabris, a pain and addiction specialist in Sudbury, sheds light on why we need to reduce our opioid use and how cannabis can help relieve pain without the risks.

## CANADIAN SENIORS ARE BIG OPIOID CONSUMERS

Canadians are the world's second largest per capita consumer of prescription opioids after Americans, and our opioid use is highest among seniors.

## OPIOIDS RELIEVE PAIN WHEN USED PROPERLY

Opioids are medicines that relieve acute or chronic pain by acting on specific nerve cells in the spinal

cord and brain. Examples of opioids are morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl, hydromorphone, and OxyNEO.

## THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS WITH OPIOIDS

"Opioids are fantastic medicines short-term. If you break your leg, you want to have opioids. In the medium term, they are good for a lot of people. But in the long term, we're starting to realize that opioids have significant issues, particularly at a high dose."

In the older population, opioids cause sleepiness, constipation, reflux, and problems with the endocrine systems. They increase the risk of diabetes and reduce testosterone. Using opioids long-term can lead to increased tolerance, dependence, and withdrawal symptoms. Opioids have dangerous, unpredictable effects, including addiction, overdose, and death.

## SENIORS IN PARTICULAR ARE AT RISK

People over age 65 have the highest rate of hospitalization for opioid poisoning in Canada, according to a 2016 report from the Canadian Institute for Health Information and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. Almost 25% of all opioid-related hospitalizations in 2014–2015 were for seniors, yet we represent only 16% of the population. We're at higher risk for adverse drug reactions because of the number of drugs we take, our prevalence of chronic conditions, and age-related changes in the body.

## NEW GUIDELINE RECOMMENDS REDUCING OPIOIDS

The 2017 Canadian Guideline for Opioids for Chronic Non-Cancer Pain recommends restricting opioids for new users to less than 50 mg of morphine equivalent a day (MED). For patients who are already using high-dose opioids, the guideline suggests gradually tapering them to below 90 mg MED, potentially even discontinuing them entirely. Under the previous 2010 guideline, the watchful dose was 200 mg MED.

## OVERCOME THE FEAR OF WITHDRAWAL

Tapering opioids, particularly from a high dose, should be done carefully and slowly over a long period of time to avoid increased pain and withdrawal issues. "Unless you're doing it wrong, your patient shouldn't have a great deal of withdrawal. If you taper down in a reasonable way and you educate and support, then

you can get people down from very high doses of opioids to much more moderate doses of opioids with relatively little discomfort. The big problem is the underlying pain and how you're going to deal with that." Until fairly recently it's been tough to do because there was nothing else to offer.

### MEDICAL CANNABIS IS A REASONABLE OPTION

Cannabis helps patients reduce or completely eliminate opioids. "As a long-term management strategy for pain, medical cannabis is safer than opioids, has limited side effects—in fact, people who are regular users report no side effects or limited side effects—and may be synergistic with opioids." More and more of Dr. Marks de Chabris's older patients are interested in cannabis because they've been through the side effects of various medications—including fatigue, difficulty sleeping,

depression, weight gain, and heart problems—and they're not willing to take chances.

### THE RISK IS LOWER

With medical cannabis, the risk is significantly lower than opioids. "You can't die by overdosing on medical cannabis. You could easily die by overdosing on a strong opioid," he says. This is because the body has many opioid receptors in the brainstem (which regulates respiration and heart rate), whereas there are very few—if any—cannabinoid receptors in the brainstem.

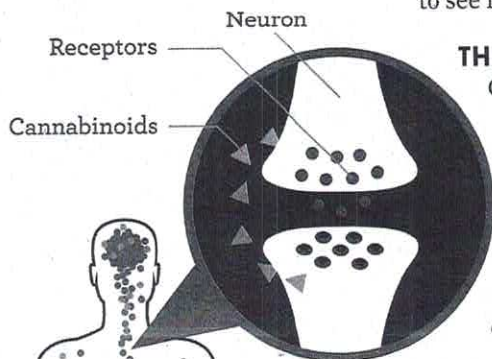
### TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

Have an honest conversation with your doctor about reducing the use of opioids and work with them to find a reasonable, rational, and safe titration or taper down of your opioids. If while you're tapering your pain worsens, tell your doctor you'd like to try medical cannabis to see if that helps relieve it.

with severe physical disabilities, and people in palliative care. Oils are ingested by applying droplets under the tongue or by adding them to foods or drinks. They have no noticeable odour, so they can be used discreetly whenever and wherever you want. And because oils are processed through the gut, the effects last longer than inhaled cannabis.

### CHOOSING THE RIGHT CANNABIS

The quality of the medical cannabis you use is important. For patients who suffer from serious illnesses that impact their immune systems, the health risks of consuming contaminated cannabis can be potentially fatal. Make sure that your cannabis comes from a licensed producer. It's illegal to purchase from compassion clubs or storefronts, and licensed producers have extensive quality, safety, and security requirements. CanniMed Ltd. is the only licensed producer to grow and manufacture their cannabis following Good Manufacturing Practices—the same standard used for all traditional pharmaceutical products—including 281 points of quality control. It's grown in a controlled, sanitary environment, and every batch is tested for bacteria, toxins, and moulds. The result is a consistent, trusted supply of pharmaceutical-grade cannabis.



### THE BENEFITS OF OILS

Cannabis oils are convenient, easy to use, and ingested rather than inhaled, making them appropriate for a wide range of patients, including people with chronic breathing problems (such as asthma, chronic bronchitis, or emphysema), people

## Why Cannabis Works for Pain

### The Endocannabinoid System

Each of us has an endocannabinoid system (ECS), just like a nervous system and a digestive system. It's involved in many bodily processes, including pain-sensation. Some medical conditions affect the proper functioning of the ECS, leading to pain. The ECS naturally produces chemicals similar to those in cannabis. These

chemicals pass messages between the brain and body parts through neurons and receptors.

### The Cannabinoids in Cannabis

The cannabinoids in cannabis supplement the cannabinoids normally produced by the ECS.

They bind to pain receptors and alleviate the pain signals sent to the brain. THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol)

causes the psychoactive effects or "high" felt from cannabis. It helps with symptoms such as inflammation and pain, insomnia, and nausea and vomiting. CBD (cannabidiol) has almost no psychoactive effect.

It helps with inflammation and seizures and acts as an antidepressant, working on similar receptors to medications that act on serotonin receptors.

The dots are the locations in the body where cannabinoids act on the ECS.