

Cannabis and cannabis-related substances in the management of Pain

Key Message

There is not yet enough information on whether these drugs are safe, or effective to use for long-term pain, and further research is needed urgently. Until we know more, treatments containing cannabis or cannabis-like medicines they should not be prescribed, unless a patient is taking part in a clinical study.

What is the purpose of this information?

You may have heard from the media or other sources that some new cannabis-related drugs might help some people with long-term (often referred to as 'chronic') painful conditions. Recent changes in the law have meant that some new cannabis-related substances have, or may soon become available for doctors to prescribe. However, despite some claims in the media and elsewhere, there is not enough evidence to say that they are safe or effective to be used.

This leaflet is only about painful conditions. It does not cover other areas of medical practice, nor recreational use.

What is Cannabis and Cannabinoids?

Cannabis refers to a mix of substances that come from a plant called cannabis sativa.

A 'cannabinoid' is single substance extracted from part of the plant, or something similar. Individual cannabinoids often have very different effects on the human body. Some are well known, e.g. tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD), but there are many others.

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What types are available?

There are three types of drugs which you may see mentioned in the UK , but none appear to be of particular help with long-term pain.

- 1 Nabilone has been used in the UK (and a similar substance, Dronabinol, in the USA) as an anti-sickness drug in cancer treatment. It has been studied for use in pain medicine, but it does not appear to help.
- 2 Nabixomols (Sativex©), a mixture containing 50% THC and 50% CBD extracted from cannabis plants has been available for managing muscle stiffness in patients with multiple sclerosis. Studies in patients with long-term pain have shown it is of little help.
- 3 A new extract of CBD (Epidyolex©) has recently been licenced for use in some rare types of childhood epilepsy.

Does cannabis work for pain treatment?

So far the Faculty of Pain Medicine, the Royal College of Physicians and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) (NG144.1, November 2019) are clear that there is not enough information to show that these drugs are either safe or if they are effective to benefit patients.

Will my pain doctor prescribe cannabis?

No. Current information does not support the routine use of Cannabis or Cannabis-like substances, unless this is part of a clinical study.

What should happen in the future?

Long-term pain is common and there are limited treatments currently available. However, until we have research to show that these drugs are both safe and helpful, they should not be prescribed unless part of a clinical study.