

Legalization of Cannabis

A Guide for Manitoba Physiotherapists

Introduction:

The use of recreational cannabis became legal in Canada on October 17, 2018 while the administration of cannabis for medical purposes has been available for a number of years. Whether used recreationally or for medical purposes it is important that physiotherapists educate themselves about their roles and responsibilities when treating patients who use cannabis.

The College's position is that physiotherapists and student physiotherapists are expected to comply with all of their existing professional expectations, including those set out in relevant legislation, the Code of Ethics, and College position statements/practice standard/ practice directions and policies. Cannabis should be treated in much the same way as alcohol or prescription pain medications. Although the substances are different, the effects are similar, and issues of impairment and consent are largely the same.

What do we know about cannabis?

According to the World Health Organization, Cannabis is a generic term used to denote the several psychoactive preparations of the plant *Cannabis sativa*.

Marijuana

A nickname for cannabis from Mexican origin. The term marijuana is often used in reference as a recreational drug. Other names may be found indigenous to local cultures.

Cannabinoids

Cannabinoids are the chemical compounds found in cannabis that react with various neuroreceptors in the body to produce the desired effects. The two cannabinoids that are most clinically relevant are:

- Delta 9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) the cannabinoid responsible for the physical and psychotropic effects or the “high” commonly associated with use.
- Cannabidiol (CBD) the compound that produces many of the therapeutic effects with little to no appreciable psychoactive properties, including pain relief, decreased inflammation, decreased spasticity, nausea relief, and antiseizure effects.

Cannabinoids can be ingested, inhaled, vaporized or applied externally. When the drug is delivered by inhaling or vaporizing the effects can be within minutes, peaking within 15-30 minutes, and lasting for up to 2-3 hours. When ingested through edible products the effects may take longer to be felt (up to 30- 90 minutes) and can last for 4-12 hours.^{1, 2}

Physiotherapists may already be working with individuals who are using some form of medical cannabis, or may encounter individuals who they suspect are using it recreationally.

Cannabis can:

1. Increase heart rate, blood pressure and increase myocardial oxygen demand. Physiotherapists should carefully monitor these variables in patients during exercise and chart accordingly.
2. Cause short term memory impairments in cognition, memory, and alertness impairing an individual's ability to give informed consent and effect their ability to think and react quickly. For example, the ability to make quick decisions when driving may be impaired.
3. Have adverse effects on coordination, reaction time, and balance. This may increase the risk of falls and other accidents, especially in older adults or others with neuromuscular conditions, while in your care.
4. Have negative effects on mood, including confusion, hallucinations, panic reactions, paranoia and acute psychotic events.²

Other items physiotherapists may wish to consider

No Smoking Policies

The same no smoking policies apply whether it's tobacco or cannabis. If you don't already have a policy in place, you may want to develop one.

According to the law, people who use cannabis recreationally can only do so in a private residence. Anyone who uses medical cannabis can smoke or vape in outdoor public spaces as long as they are not within eight meters of a public entrance (the same as tobacco restrictions). Please refer to the Manitoba government website for further information at:

<https://manitoba.ca/cannabis/knowthefacts/medicalcannabis.html> or

<https://manitoba.ca/cannabis/index.html>

¹Information for Health Care Professional: Cannabis (marihuana, marijuana) and the cannabinoids accessed December 2018 at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/drugs-medication/cannabis/information-medical-practitioners/information-health-care-professionals-cannabis-cannabinoids.html#a4.0>

² Ciccone Charles D. Medical Marijuana: Just the Beginning of a Long, Strange Trip? *Phys Ther.* 2017; 97:239-248

Scent-Free Policies

If you have a scent-free policy and the person smells strongly of cannabis, do the same thing you would do if they were wearing a strong-smelling perfume or smelled of tobacco—ask them to wash the scent off and refrain from wearing it in future. In the case of smoking, they may need to change their clothing.

Incorporating Cannabis into PT Practice

Remember, physiotherapists can't recommend, sell, administer or prescribe drugs, including cannabis. If your patient is considering cannabis as a treatment adjunct, refer them to an appropriate professional who can recommend or prescribe. Note that only doctors and nurse practitioners can authorize/prescribe medical marijuana in Manitoba.

What questions can I ask?

Part of your routine assessment has always included a detailed history taking including asking about medication (prescription and non-prescription) use. Physiotherapists should discuss cannabis or recreational marijuana use with their patients, similar to the manner of discussing alcohol or cigarette smoking. Patients may not immediately report cannabis use, but over time you may become aware of their use. Ensure you document accordingly in the patients' health record and keep in mind the effects cannabis use may have on an individual (i.e. masking pain, decreased coordination and balance etc.) and adjust your treatments accordingly.

Refusing Treatment

What if my patient shows up for treatment and is high?

Simple—do the same thing you'd do if they showed up intoxicated and were either not capable of providing consent or treatment would be risky to them in their condition—refuse treatment.

Every time someone arrives for an appointment, you need to decide if the person can provide consent. You start by assuming that they're capable, unless the person is obviously impaired.

If the person is obviously impaired, either from non-prescription or prescription medication including cannabis, or alcohol, inform them that you're unable to provide treatment because you believe that they're impaired. Remember you must also document the facts (i.e. unable to treat because of suspected impaired judgement) in your records. Reschedule and ask that they refrain from drinking or ingesting before their next appointment.

Personal Use

If you decide to use cannabis, you must ensure that you are in no way impaired when providing treatment to patients. Remember the effects from cannabis can remain with you for hours after use. Performance of complex task may even be impaired for as long as 24 hours. Adhere to the policies in your place of employment and ensure you are not a risk to your patients.

Human Rights

What if my patient uses cannabis medicinally rather than recreationally?

Whether a client's cannabis use is medically authorized or not, physiotherapists must use this information to inform the physiotherapy process and use their knowledge, skill and judgment during physiotherapy care delivery.

Regardless of why the patient is using, if they're not capable of consenting because their judgment is impaired, you should refuse treatment. Be sure to be respectful and non-judgmental in your communication, and remember, cannabis use does not necessarily result in impaired judgement.

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