

# Cannabis and Seniors

It is no coincidence that the Baby Boomer generation, who grew up with more exposure to recreational cannabis use, are now the fastest growing group of cannabis users in Canada (Stathokostas, 2020). This history combined with the recent legalization of cannabis and the growing recognition of its medicinal uses can explain the increase in cannabis use among older adults (Stathokostas, 2020).

There are two ways to access cannabis safely and legally: 1) through a prescription and; 2) through a government-approved vendor (this may be a government-run retail store or a private dispensary in-person or online). If purchasing in-store you should look for a sign that the store is approved by the federal government. Additionally, legal cannabis products with more than 0.3% THC have an excise stamp on the package with each province and territory having a different colour stamp (Active Aging Canada, 2021).



## Safe Consumption

The Canadian Coalition for Seniors' Mental Health (CCSMH, 2020) recommends the following tips for safe use:

- Buy from a regulated source!
- Even if using recreationally, you should discuss your cannabis use with a healthcare provider. Cannabis use may interact with any prescription or over-the-counter medications you may be taking.
- Make sure you read the label carefully and pay close attention to the THC concentration.
- Start with a low THC content (ideally less than 10%) and increase slowly!
- Start with a low amount and give yourself some time to feel the effects (it could happen quickly or slowly)!

## Health Benefits

Regardless of the method you choose and your motivator (medicinal or recreational reasons), there is growing recognition that cannabis use may include the following health benefits:

- Improved quality of life;
- Pain relief;
- Increasing your appetite and weight gain;
- Reducing nausea and vomiting due to chemotherapy;
- Reducing muscle spasms due to multiple sclerosis or spinal cord injury;
- Encouraging sleep; and
- Helping with depression and anxiety (Active Aging Canada, 2021; CCSA, 2020; CCSMH, 2020).

Keep in mind that while there is growing evidence on the health benefits of cannabis, we still have a lot to learn. The best way to have fun and stay safe while using cannabis is to speak with your healthcare provider.



## Cannabis and Aging

It is important to consider that our body and mind functions slow down as we age and some of these changes impact how cannabis (THC and CBD) are processed in the body. For example:

- Lower kidney function can affect how cannabis clears out of the body.
- Smoking or vaping cannabis can make symptoms of poor lung health or disease worse.
- A slower digestive system and reduced liver functioning can affect how the body processes and removes cannabis from the body.
- Muscles, bones, and sensory functions (vision, hearing and smell) can increase the risk of falls or injuries. This risk is higher when using THC because it is impairing (Ottawa Public Health, 2021).
- Smoking cannabis can increase your heart rate and affect your blood pressure. Therefore, for those with a heart condition, this increases your chances of having a cardiac event such as arrhythmia, angina, heart attack or stroke. Cannabis can also lead to fainting and increase risk of falls due to its effect on blood pressure (Ottawa Public Health, 2021).
- History of mental illness or substance use disorders

## Cannabis and Mental Health

While some older adults may use cannabis to cope with loneliness, isolation, depression or loss that many experience as they age, using cannabis to cope could increase mental health problems (Ottawa Public Health, 2021). Using cannabis regularly can lead to cannabis use disorder or dependence which makes cutting back or stopping use difficult. If you have a family history of mental illnesses such as psychosis or schizophrenia, using cannabis can increase your chances of also experiencing these illnesses. Consuming too much THC at one time can lead to temporary psychosis, symptoms may include: paranoia, delusions and hallucinations (Ottawa Public Health, 2021).

### References:

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