Veterans’ Knowledge and Perceptions About Cannabis

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Background

- Over the past decade, cannabis use has increased substantially among U.S. adults.
- Among U.S. veterans, increasing rates of cannabis use and cannabis use disorder are well documented. Use of cannabis for medicinal purposes is double that of non-veterans.
- Despite the increase in cannabis usage, data about veterans’ knowledge, perceptions, and usage patterns is limited.

Methods

- IRB approved cross-sectional cohort study of 206 veterans at Boston VA in inpatient psychiatry units and residential programs.
- Anonymous survey; each volunteer given a $5 gift card.
- Survey responses analyzed using SAS version 9.3.
- Summary statistics generated using percentages, means, categorical variables tested using Chi Square.

Results

How does early usage of cannabis affect current drug use?

- 62% reported first using cannabis between ages 0-17.
- Initiating cannabis between ages 0-17 was significantly associated with a greater percentage of current substance use for tobacco, alcohol, cannabis use for non-medical reasons, and other illicit drug use.

Perceptions of safety & general knowledge:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Agree % (n)</th>
<th>Disagree % (n)</th>
<th>Undecided % (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“It is safe to drive after consuming cannabis”</td>
<td>22 (44)</td>
<td>49 (97)</td>
<td>28 (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Cannabis use can have permanent effects on the brain”</td>
<td>39 (78)</td>
<td>26 (52)</td>
<td>34 (68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Cannabis is more potent than it was in the past”</td>
<td>67 (135)</td>
<td>13 (27)</td>
<td>19 (39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Opioids are more dangerous than cannabis”</td>
<td>83 (166)</td>
<td>11 (23)</td>
<td>6 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“CBD is safer than THC”</td>
<td>62 (108)</td>
<td>38 (66)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“CBD and THC come from the same plant”</td>
<td>78 (139)</td>
<td>22 (39)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Cannabis is bad for people’s health”</td>
<td>28 (36)</td>
<td>68 (136)</td>
<td>14 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Long term use of medical marijuana is very safe”</td>
<td>53 (103)</td>
<td>17 (33)</td>
<td>30 (58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

- Many veterans hospitalized on inpatient psychiatric wards have used cannabis in the past year. Almost one-quarter reported using >10,000 times in their life.
- There was no significant correlation between extent of use and perceived health.
- Initiating cannabis at a younger age was associated with a significantly greater percentage of current substance use.
- Veterans possessed experiential knowledge but lacked an evidence-based understanding about cannabis.
- Although cannabis use has been associated with impaired driving, only half of veterans felt it was unsafe to drive under the influence.
- Veterans generally felt cannabis is safe, although some were undecided about the safety and efficacy of cannabis.
- Most participants felt cannabis is an effective treatment for pain, PTSD, and anxiety, despite conflicting evidence supporting its usage for these conditions.
- Cannabis education should begin early in life. Continuing education should be incorporated into inpatient unit group curriculum.

References