Is Marijuana as Effective as OTC and Prescription Drugs?

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People who use marijuana to treat symptoms of anxiety, fatigue and neuropathy say it is as effective as over-the-counter (OTC) remedies or prescription drugs recommended by their health care providers, according to a survey-based study published in the May 2009 issue of *Clinical Nursing Research*.

Marijuana use, both recreationally and medically to treat various maladies, is widespread among people with HIV. Though a few small studies have compared marijuana to synthetic marijuana substitutes such as Marinol (dronabinol), few large studies have compared marijuana's effectiveness with standard OTC or prescription drugs for anxiety, fatigue and pain from nerve damage (peripheral neuropathy).

To explore the effectiveness of marijuana used by people living with HIV to manage these symptoms, Inge Corless, RN, PhD, of the MGH Institute of Health Professions School of Nursing in Boston, and her colleagues conducted surveys of 768 HIV-positive patients in the continental United States, Puerto Rico and Africa. Of those surveyed, 59 percent were male, 38 percent were female, and 2 percent were transgender. Most were of African or Hispanic descent. Fifteen percent of those surveyed reported using marijuana to manage the symptoms of their HIV disease, most of them from the United States. Marijuana use for symptom management was as high as 26 percent for people who had nausea and as low as 19 percent in those with fatigue.

Though marijuana was generally rated as more effective than OTC or prescription medications for symptom management, the difference was not statistically significant—meaning that it was small enough to have occurred by chance. Marijuana was rated higher than OTC or prescription drugs for anxiety, depression, diarrhea and neuropathy. For fatigue and nausea, however, marijuana was rated somewhat lower than OTC or prescription drugs.

Though the authors concede that because people taking marijuana may experience euphoria, they may falsely rate its symptom management effectiveness more highly than treatments that do not cause euphoria. Because people rated marijuana as nearly equivalent or better than other symptom management treatments, however, the authors are encouraging further comparative studies to determine its effectiveness.

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