



Legalize Medical Marijuana, Doctors Say in Survey

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A majority of doctors say that medical marijuana should be legalized nationally and that it can deliver real benefits to patients, [a new survey](#) by WebMD/Medscape finds.

WebMD's web site for health professionals surveyed 1,544 doctors as more than 10 states consider bills to legalize medical marijuana. It is already legal in 21 states and Washington, DC.

The survey found solid support for those legalization efforts, with most doctors saying medical marijuana should be legal in their states. They agreed that medical marijuana should be an option for patients. The survey included doctors from more than 12 specialties and 48 states.

Marijuana's Perceived Health Benefits

Solid data on marijuana's health benefits are lacking. Research has been limited because the federal government has designated marijuana as a "Schedule I" substance, a designation used for the most dangerous drugs having "no accepted medicinal use and a high potential for abuse."

But as state after state legalizes marijuana, doctors have gained nearly 2 decades of anecdotal evidence about its effects. Dramatic stories about families moving to Colorado for a special strain of marijuana to treat their children's seizure disorders have led to stronger calls for research.

The Epilepsy Foundation recently called on the Drug Enforcement Administration to relax its restrictions on marijuana so that it can be properly studied, as did two prominent epilepsy researchers in a recent New York Times op-ed.

"The medical community is clearly saying they support using marijuana as a potential treatment option for any number of medical problems. In fact, many doctors already prescribe it. But health professionals are still unclear as to what the long-term effects may be. The findings would indicate a strong desire to have the DEA ease the restrictions on research so that additional studies can be done to conclusively show where medical marijuana can help and where it might not," says WebMD Chief Medical Editor Michael W. Smith, MD.

In addition to seizure disorders, medical marijuana is often used to treat chronic pain from injuries or medical conditions such as cancer, nausea from medication, and multiple sclerosis.

Doctors' Responses

Here's a look at the survey numbers for doctors asked about medical marijuana:

- 69% say it can help with certain treatments and conditions.
- 67% say it should be a medical option for patients.
- 56% support making it legal nationwide.

- 50% of doctors in states where it is not legal say it should be legal in their states.
- 52% of doctors in states considering new laws say it should be legal in their states.

The difference in support between doctors who say it should be a medical option for patients vs. those who support legalization could stem from their views toward national or local control. Also, doctors may prefer that medical marijuana use be driven by FDA guidelines.

Support for medical marijuana also varied by specialty. Oncologists and hematologists showed the highest level, with 82% saying marijuana delivers real benefits to patients. These specialties are also the most likely to say that marijuana should be a medical option for patients (82%). Medical marijuana is used to treat cancer pain, nausea related to chemotherapy, and to stimulate appetite.

Rheumatologists ranked the lowest on that question, with 54% saying it delivers benefits. Marijuana may help arthritis pain and inflammation but it is not commonly used.

Neurologists reported the highest number of patients asking if medical marijuana might help them (70%). Marijuana may help multiple sclerosis and severe seizure disorders. Oncologists and hematologists had the second highest level of patient inquiries with ophthalmologists coming in third. Medical marijuana can help relieve eye pressure with glaucoma but doesn't work as well as other medications.

"One of the most documented uses of medical marijuana is in the treatment of pain. Medical marijuana may be a better painkiller than narcotic painkillers, like oxycodone, with less potential for addiction," says Smith. "More research will help us better understand how best to use medical marijuana in the treatment of many conditions that cause chronic pain."

Consumers' Responses

A survey of consumers on WebMD had similar levels of support for medical marijuana among the general public. Among 2,960 surveyed:

- 50% support making it legal nationwide.
- 49% of consumers in states where it is not legal say it should be legal in their states.
- 52% say it can help with treatments and conditions.
- 45% say the benefits outweigh the risks.

Most doctors and consumers surveyed oppose legalizing recreational marijuana nationally.

Colorado's first stores selling marijuana for recreational use opened Jan. 1, and similar stores will open in Washington state later this year. Close to half of survey respondents say they disagree with those states' decisions.

WebMD's survey was completed by 2,960 random site visitors from Feb. 23 to 26, 2014. It has a margin of error of +/- 1.8%. Medscape's survey was completed from Feb. 25 to March 3, 2014 by 1,544 doctors who are members of Medscape's panel, representing more than 12 specialty areas. It has a margin of error of +/- 2.5%.

SOURCES:

Gallup: "For the first time, Americans favor legalizing marijuana."

WebMD: "Marijuana – recreational and medical – what the patient thinks – what the doctor says."

USA Today: "Which states have legalized medical marijuana?"

Medscape: "Colorado Family Physicians' Attitudes Toward Medical Marijuana."

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