

Marijuana and chemotherapy ^[1]

Hey Alice,

How does marijuana help a cancer patient undergoing chemotherapy?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Chemotherapy comes with some pretty common, and unpleasant, side effects. Many patients lose their desire to eat and experience nausea and vomiting. Still others develop a condition called cachexia, in which they lose a significant portion of their body weight, both fat and muscle. This condition, especially when combined with the loss of appetite and nausea, can cause those being treated for cancer to feel physically weak and emotionally drained. The National Cancer Institute (NCI) explains that maintaining an adequate weight and absorbing sufficient nutrients can help patients feel, look, and function better, and may even help their bodies tolerate cancer therapy.

Traditionally, patients are given drugs called antiemetics in tandem with their chemotherapy in order to reduce nausea and increase appetite. But not all people respond adequately to these medications. That's where marijuana comes in. It has been known for years that THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol), the main chemical component of marijuana, tends to stimulate one's appetite. In fact, THC has been available since the mid-1980s for cancer patients in a synthetically engineered capsule form. This medication, known as dronabinol in the medical world, has been shown to reduce nausea, increase appetite, and help patients gain weight. Right now there is a study under way, supported by the NCI, which is designed to measure the impact THC therapy, as dronabinol, has on the management of these symptoms in cancer patients. ^[2] There is also research being done on the medical use of THC by people with AIDS and those with glaucoma.

Interestingly, some people feel that this form of THC is not as effective as marijuana would be in its natural, plant form. This might be because one of the chemical components of marijuana, cannabidiol, is not contained in the prescription pills, and this compound has anti-anxiety effects that some patients find helpful. Therefore, there are those doctors, patients, and others who contend that the marijuana plant should be available for medical purposes. Others don't think so,

arguing that smoking marijuana can have a negative effect on lung function, and that the chemicals released may contain carcinogens. (For more info on this, see [Marijuana: Does it cause cancer?](#) [3] in the [Go Ask Alice! Alcohol and Other Drugs](#) [4] archive.) For this reason, thought is being given to possible ways of using marijuana medically that wouldn't involve smoking. There are also some questions remaining about marijuana's effects on the immune system, and some patients may find the "high" produced by using marijuana to be unfavorable. In either case, the fact is that marijuana is still illegal to use in most places, and this may impact doctors' (and patients') feelings about suggesting its use.

If you or someone you know is looking for assistance with the side effects of chemotherapy, you can get more information from the [National Cancer Institute](#) [5].

Alice!

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