

Assessing the public health impacts of cannabis legalisation in Canada

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Introduction and Aims:

Canada legalised cannabis for adult recreational use in October 2018. We summarise evidence on the public health impacts following cannabis legalisation in Canada.

Design and Methods:

We systematically searched for evidence on public health impacts associated with legalisation in PubMed, Embase, Statistics Canada and government websites. Impacts we assessed included cannabis use behaviours, cannabis-impaired driving or motor vehicle accidents, health service and mental health presentations.

Results:

Legalisation has increased adult access to a diverse range of cannabis products, including highly potent extracts, while also, reducing the price of cannabis products and substantially reduced arrests for cannabis offences. Population surveys showed an increase in the prevalence of cannabis use in adults after legalisation, although use was increasing before legalisation. Some surveys showed no increases in the prevalence of cannabis use in high school students, and no changes in the prevalence of daily or near-daily use. Smoking was still the most common method of cannabis use. The use of cannabis edibles and extracts has increased and so have ED attendances by adults for acute adverse cannabinoid effects and by children who have unintentionally ingested cannabis products. There was mixed evidence on changes in the prevalence of cannabis-impaired driving and psychosis or other mental health related presentations after legalisation.

Discussions and Conclusions:

Cannabis access for an increased variety of products on the legal market for adults have increased in Canada after legalisation. Evidence to date showed no increase in cannabis use in adolescents. These short-term effects may under-estimate the impacts of a highly commercialised cannabis industry on public health over the next few decades.

Implications for Practice or Policy:

The increase in the potency of products available on the market is of public health concern. The implementation of legalisation in Canada is still at an early stage and future research to monitor the longer-term impacts are warranted.

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