

Researchers fret as info lags on pot effects on older adults

6 December 2016, by Kristen Wyatt



In this Aug. 21, 2015 photo, multiple sclerosis patient and author of the memoir "One day at a Time," David Sloan, who is a medical marijuana patient, exhales smoke from medical cannabis concentrate given to him with help from his caregiver, at Sloan's home in Highlands Ranch, south of Denver. Marijuana researchers have predominantly looked at how the drug affects young, developing brains. But increased pot use by older adults has scientists calling for more study of how aging influences drug use, and whether elderly pot users face potential health benefits or risks. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

Surveys show a small but growing number of older adults are using marijuana—a trend that worries researchers who say not enough information exists about how pot affects older users.

Abundant research has been done on how the drug impacts developing brains, but little is known about the potential consequences on older users—even as recreation pot has been legalized in a number of states.

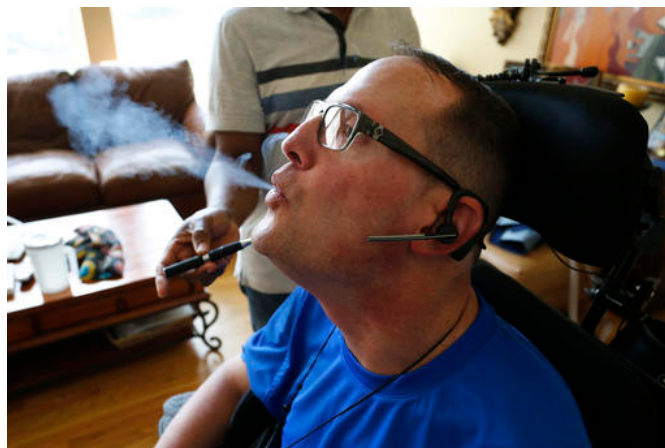
Researchers at New York University say pot could pose health challenges to older users ranging from memory loss to risk of falling.

The researchers reviewed data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health and found a big increase in adults over 50 reporting they had used pot in the past year.

About 2.8 percent of those surveyed said they had used pot a decade ago. Six years later in 2013, the rate was about 4.8 percent—a 71 percent jump.

"Historically older people haven't had high rates of substance use, but this is changing," said Dr. Benjamin Han, a geriatrician at NYU who led the study published this week in the journal *Addiction*. "As baby boomers age, we're going to see more and more of this."

Older adults are still much less likely than younger people to use pot. In the 2013 survey, about 19 percent of people 18 to 25 reported using marijuana in the previous month.



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Doctors have little to go on when treating older people who use pot, Han said.

"When it comes to, for instance, alcohol, there have been a lot of studies about effects on older populations, guidelines on how much older people should be consuming," Han said. "But when it comes to marijuana, we have nothing."

The study drew no conclusions about whether older pot users are using the drug as medicine or for fun.

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said last year that marijuana can be helpful for treating certain ailments, but he added that medical marijuana research is preliminary and he called for more research.

Federal drug law considers marijuana a drug with no medical use.

Marijuana legalization debates center on the drug's consequences for kids, perhaps leaving adults to think there's no downside to using it.

"Before the liberalization of marijuana policy, lots of young people used marijuana and then as they got jobs and kids and mortgages, they stopped," said Jonathan Caulkins, a professor of public policy at Carnegie-Mellon University who was not involved in the NYU study.

"It seems that as the social stigmatization has decreased, more users are continuing into adulthood."

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