



Cannabis and HIV/AIDS:

9. How to Deal with the Stigma and Discrimination of Cannabis Use

Included in this series of fact sheets on Cannabis and HIV/AIDS:

1. The Medicinal Use of Cannabis
2. How to Apply to Use Medicinal Cannabis Legally
3. How to Speak to your Doctor about Medicinal Cannabis
4. Information Sheet for Physicians
5. Where to Find Cannabis for Medicinal Purposes
6. A Few Tips for Safer Use and Better Health
7. Cooking with Cannabis
8. Tips for Growing Cannabis Safely
9. How to Deal with the Stigma and Discrimination of Cannabis Use

There are many different attitudes in our society regarding the use of cannabis. Although people are more accepting of cannabis use for medicinal purposes, people’s reactions can affect the way you feel about using cannabis for medicinal purposes. You may even have your own reactions to cannabis use, especially if you have not used it before needing it for medicinal reasons.

Where does the stigma come from?

“Reefer madness” came about when cannabis became illegal, early in the 20th century.

Anti-cannabis propaganda scared people and deterred them from using cannabis. Much of the dangers were greatly exaggerated and still affect the way people think about cannabis use today. The war on drugs and “just say

no” messages have also had an impact on how people perceive cannabis use. For many people, committing any illegal act is wrong and contributes to the way they feel about cannabis use.

Contact Information:

These fact sheets have been prepared by the Canadian AIDS Society, in consultation with a National Steering Committee and a Legal Consultant. They are easily photocopied. We encourage you to distribute them widely.

For updates on these fact sheets, or for more information, please visit our web site at <www.cdn aids.ca/cannabis> or contact us at:

*Canadian AIDS Society
190 O’Connor Street, Suite 800
Ottawa ON, Canada, K2P 2R3*

*Tel: 1-613-230-3580
Toll free: 1-800-499-1986*



What are some of the stigmas associated with cannabis use for medicinal purposes?

- **Laughter and scepticism.** Some people will laugh when you tell them that you use cannabis for medicinal purposes and will not believe that you are doing it to relieve your symptoms. Some people believe that cannabis has no medicinal value. In our Canadian culture, there is often humour associated with cannabis use.
- **Negative reactions.** Some people will judge you for using cannabis, even if it is for medicinal reasons. They have strong reactions to the fact that it is an illegal drug. For some, a drug is a drug. They may even call you a “drug addict”. You may hear some people say that you will lose any motivation to do anything. They may refer to you as a “pothead”. People tend to fear what they do not understand.
- **Negative messages.** Sometimes you are exposed to negative attitudes about the use of cannabis through media and people around you, without it necessarily being targeted at you. These situations can contribute to how you feel about your cannabis use.

How Do You Feel about Cannabis Use?

When a society perpetuates negative, judgmental attitudes toward any group of people, especially with regard to their different values, beliefs and ways of life, it is being oppressive.

This oppression results in people being stigmatized, marginalized and ostracized for their beliefs or actions. This oppression, in turn, gets internalized by the people who experience it.

You may fear people discovering your use of cannabis. You may even judge yourself, feel some self-hatred or shame, which may make it difficult for you to accept your use of cannabis. It’s no wonder that many people choose to hide these feelings. It’s another way of “being in the closet”.

Should You Tell Others about Your Cannabis Use for Medicinal Purposes?

The choice to tell others is obviously a personal one. Gaining support and understanding from others can go a long way in helping you accept and feel better about your use of cannabis for medicinal purposes.

Telling Others About Your Cannabis Use for Medicinal Purposes

- **Start by telling someone you know and trust.** Having a few close people to talk to about your use of cannabis will help you feel supported and understood. Building a “safe network” of people will help you come to terms with accepting your use and will make it easier to deal with the negative reactions of others. If you are concerned about others finding out, make sure you ask whomever you tell to be discreet. It is up to you to disclose this information to whoever you choose, as you see fit.
- **Telling your doctor.** It is important for your doctor to be aware of all of the different treatments and therapies you use to manage living with HIV/AIDS. For tips on how to speak with your doctor, please refer to “How to Speak to your Doctor about Medicinal Cannabis.”
- **Telling your family.** You may wish to tell some family members, but not others. You will have to use your judgment and perhaps feel the waters about who you can and cannot tell. Sometimes people’s reactions are not the ones we expect, good or bad.
- **Telling your children.** It may be a challenge to discuss cannabis use with your children, especially as they get messages about cannabis use at school. You can approach this subject like you would for any other of your medications.
- **Deciding who NOT to tell:** Some people can have an impact on your life if they find out about your cannabis use. If they have a level of authority over you, it may cause some disruptions in your life if they find out about your cannabis use: landlords, police, neighbours, or your children’s teachers. In situations like this, it may be very helpful for you to have obtained the legal right to use cannabis for medicinal purposes. Please refer to the fact sheet on “How to Apply to Use Medicinal Cannabis Legally”.

Do you have to disclose your HIV status to people who ask about your medicinal use?

Absolutely not. Who you choose to disclose to is your decision.

If you tell someone that you are using cannabis for medicinal purposes, they will often ask what your medical condition is. Don’t feel you have to tell them

in order to justify your use. Reveal only what you are comfortable revealing. You can simply say that you are using it to manage some symptoms.

What do you do if someone reacts negatively?

If you get into a situation where someone reacts negatively, all you can do is provide them with information to the best of your knowledge.

Some people will come around to being more receptive to your use of cannabis if they understand the way it works and how you use it to manage your symptoms. However, not everyone will come around. If you have difficulty moving past someone’s negative reaction,

talk to people you know who support you. There may be some people who choose to report someone’s cannabis use to authorities. To protect yourself, you may want to apply to use medicinal cannabis legally.

How can you use medicinal cannabis legally?

Some people tell us that obtaining an Authorization to Possess cannabis for medicinal purposes from Health Canada has helped them gain credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of others, or to themselves.

Being able to use cannabis legally may also alleviate the stress some people feel when they use cannabis for medicinal purposes. For more information on

how to apply for an Authorization to Possess, please refer to the fact sheet on “How to Apply to Use Medicinal Cannabis Legally”.

Discrimination

Discrimination occurs when a person is treated unfairly and unjustly on the basis of belonging or being perceived to belong to a particular group.

In other words, if you are refused services or are treated differently or negatively because you use cannabis for medicinal purposes, you are being discriminated against. Sometimes discrimination results from someone’s failure to act. Society’s attitudes and practices can also have discriminatory effects due to the stigma they perpetuate. Some forms of discrimination are prohibited by human rights law.

Examples of discrimination include being evicted for your use of medicinal cannabis, being denied health care services because of your use of medicinal cannabis and Children’s Aid Society taking your children from you because of your use of medicinal cannabis. If you feel that you have been discriminated against by your landlord, your health care providers, the police, or any other person or organization, you may wish to pursue legal action.

Useful Resources:

- **British Columbia Persons with AIDS Society’s Advocacy Publications:** <www.bcpwa.org>
- **HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic of Ontario:** <www.halco.org> or 1-888-705-8889 (in Ontario) or (416) 340-7790
- **Legal Aid** – see fact sheet on “How to Apply to Use Medicinal Cannabis Legally” for a list
- **Human Rights Commissions** – contact the Human Rights Commission near you



Production of this document has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Public Health Agency of Canada, nor those of Health Canada. The Canadian AIDS Society thanks Solvay Pharma for their contribution to this project.

Solvay
Pharma

