



## **Colorado Allows Doctors to Prescribe Medical Marijuana to Ease Opioid Epidemic**

*August 02, 2019*

August 02, 2019 - PRESSADVANTAGE -

With an opioid crisis that is killing an average of 130 people in the US every day, different states are looking for more and more solutions to get the situation under control. Between researching drug abuse patterns and suing pharmaceutical companies with alleged roles in spreading the epidemic, states are also implementing new laws and regulations that can potentially help reduce overdose deaths.

Colorado is now the third state in the nation after New York and Illinois to allow doctors to recommend medical marijuana for any condition for which they would prescribe an opioid.

In most states where medical marijuana is legal, it can be accessed for general pain relief. But Colorado now also allows post-operative patients or those struggling with acute pain from an injury to use medical marijuana instead of opioids. Two other states allow patients diagnosed with opioid use disorder to use medical marijuana instead of opioids: Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

?It was designed to give physicians a legal, open option to discuss [medical marijuana use] with patients,? said Colorado Rep. Edie Hooton, who co-sponsored the bill. ?It normalizes the conversation around the

issue.?

So far, research does not yet categorically support the idea of medical cannabis as a replacement for opioids. It has not yet proven to be effective when it comes to reducing opioid dependence or overdose.

The Minnesota Department of Health released the results of its study last year, involving 2,245 patients taking medical marijuana for "intractable" or chronic pain. Of the 353 patients who self-reported that they were using opioids when they began consuming medical marijuana, 63 percent had reduced or eliminated their opioid use after six months.

But another study conducted last year published in the Journal of Addiction Medicine found the opposite, saying that medical marijuana users "were significantly more likely to report medical use of prescription drugs in the past 12 months". The new Colorado bill focuses on acute pain.

"The science for this is really in its infancy, and policy is far outpacing what we know based on evidence," said Ziva Cooper, research director at the UCLA Cannabis Research Initiative. "We're very far from coming up with a conclusive statement saying cannabis can be helpful as a substitute for opioids based on controlled studies."

State lawmakers said there is enough promising evidence to support opening up a dialogue between physicians and patients about options when it comes to acute pain.

"We want to give folks a legitimate alternative," said Amanda Bent, former policy manager with the Colorado office of the Drug Policy Alliance, which supported Colorado's legislation.

Earlier this year, Illinois launched its Opioid Alternative Pilot Program, which has 2,000 active patients. But the state's broader medical cannabis program has had 77,000 patients register since 2013.

"This program was developed in order to offer patients an alternative to manage their pain condition with a long-term goal that the program would reduce overall opioid deaths in Illinois," said Conny Mueller Moody, deputy director for the Office of Health Promotion at the Illinois Department of Public Health.

Supporters of the new bill say that marijuana has a reduced risk of addiction when compared to opioids and does not produce debilitating withdrawal symptoms. Click the link to see Napa's top rehab placement programs.

The three states that allow medical marijuana as a replacement for opioids cover minors too. From 1999 to 2016, the opioid mortality rate for children and adolescents grew by 286 percent. During this period, around

9,000 minors died from an opioid overdose.

“We’ve seen tens of thousands of deaths from opiates,” said Karen O’Keefe, director of state policies at the Marijuana Policy Project. “Any alternative you have to give patients options that don’t produce fatal overdoses and does treat pain, it’s a win-win.”

Recreational marijuana is legal in 11 states and Washington, D.C., while medical marijuana is legal in 33 states. So far no other states appear to be moving in the same direction as Colorado, Illinois, and New York in the near future.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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