

Do cannabis medicines have a role in treating back and spinal pain?

Now legalised and increasingly available, cannabis medicines may offer pain management alternatives for those who are struggling with long-term back and spinal pain. Senior consultant in pain medicine, DR ANTHONY ORDMAN, discusses recent developments and the changing regulatory environment.



Scientists weighing up the results of “retrospective” medical scientific papers in to the safety of cannabis medicine.

PERHAPS back pain is so common because our spines were designed by evolution for walking on all four limbs and supported at both ends! But we, as humans, insist on walking only on our hind limbs and sitting upright, putting much more mechanical strain on every structure in our backs than they were “designed” for. Many of us mobilise our backs through stretching and exercise rather less than we perhaps should. We also tend to be much more sedentary, and so the postural “core stability” muscles surrounding our spines can become rather less effective as “guy ropes” than they should be.

Then, as intervertebral discs become worn, and facet joints at the back of the spine become enlarged and stiff, nerve roots leaving the spine to go down the arm or leg become pinched, and spinal muscles can become painfully tight, and spines can become stiff and painful.

Often, with the right balance of rest and exercise, and simple pain medicines such as paracetamol and ibuprofen, an episode of back pain can settle down relatively quickly. But some people are not so fortunate, and pain in the spine and limbs can go on to become long-term or chronic. And there are many other people, who suffer spinal pain brought on by their long-term medical conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, inflammatory arthritis, fibromyalgia, or hypermobility and Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, who really have a very difficult time, despite the best medical treatment of the underlying medical condition itself.

Centralised pain

Modern physiotherapy and medicine can often be of great help in such circumstances. But sometimes, even in the best of pain clinics, with x-ray guided spinal injections, the best pain medicines, expert physiotherapists and clinical psychologists, acupuncture and homoeopathy, these are not enough, and we struggle to help people

rid themselves of back pain, enough to be able to enjoy life again. Often, this is because the pain has been “centralised” by changes in the nerve cells of the central nervous system.

Thinking in particular of the specialist pain medicines we have to offer, choices can be surprisingly limited, and we have to be careful not to do more harm than good. Opioids such as codeine, tramadol and morphine don't often help after a few weeks, but continue to cause sedation, brain fog and constipation, with a high risk of dependency. Medicines such as amitriptyline used for nerve pain, low mood and poor sleep, can take away more from patients in terms of memory and alertness than they give through pain reduction. The same is so often true for gabapentin and pregabalin, and other medicines licensed for treating pain. And while we are hopeful that the new classes of pain medicines will come along soon, we can't expect any miracles just yet.

The endo-cannabinoid system

Throughout my years of attending national and international scientific medical meetings, almost every conference seems to have had at least one lecture on the mysterious “endo-cannabinoid system”. This is a system of natural biological pathways present in all of our bodies, where nerve cells, and immune and other cells use natural “cannabinoid” substances to signal to each other, regulating bodily processes such as pain transmission, inflammation, and so on. The function of the endo-cannabinoid system seems to have to do with normalising body activity after illness or injury. The hope had always been that, very soon, the big mainstream pharmaceutical companies would find us the medicines we needed to modulate the endo-cannabinoid system to reduce pain and improve lives.

Unfortunately, this hasn't happened, partly because the legal and regulatory frameworks of many countries have made the development of cannabinoid drugs difficult or impossible. While one or two cannabinoid medicines did become available in this country, their applications and benefits were limited. By

contrast, when desperation had driven some people to try illicitly sourced cannabis for their pain, we heard reports that these were sometimes more effective than new and expensive licensed medicines. Meanwhile, in other countries, such as Canada and Israel, the legal situation was eased, as it was seen that the pharmaceutical extracts of cannabis could be helpful for those suffering long-term pain and other conditions. Then, in November 2018, regulations were slightly eased here in the UK, to allow specialist doctors to prescribe cannabis based medicines legally, for long-term conditions where conventional medical approaches had been tried or seriously considered, without benefit to the patient.

I was keen to find out for myself what cannabis medicines might have to offer patients who I could not help in other ways. I was approached by Integro Medical Clinics to see if I would take up the medical leadership role in a service that would specialise in using the new cannabis based medicines. With the partnership and support of IPS, a pharmacy expert in dispensing pharmaceutical cannabis medicines, and further study on cannabis medicine, I found myself prescribing cannabis medicines for people whose lives were on hold because of pain. Many had already tried CBD oil and found this just wasn't enough to help, something we are seeing more and more now. But in the clinic we find that, by blending just the right amount of THC and terpenes in each individual patient's cannabis oil or flower, we are improving patients' nerve and inflammatory joint pain and the painful muscle spasm of spinal pain, as well as improving sleep at night, without the daytime sedation or dependency of conventional pain medicines. People can begin to get back to their work, childcare and leisure activities with a clear head and sharper memory. Then, within two or three months it becomes possible to relieve some of the burden of conventional pain medicines. The same cannabis medicines can also restore healthy sleep to patients, and lift mood which had been depressed by pain for so long. People also felt brighter and less anxious than before.

Anthony Ordman spent 20 years working in the Pain Management Clinic of London's Royal Free Hospital and is Past President of the Pain Medicine Section of the Royal Society of Medicine. Awarded the Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians in 2005 in recognition of his work in Pain Medicine, Anthony is now Senior Clinical Adviser and Hon. Medical Director of Integro Medical Cannabis Clinics.

Dr Anthony Ordman



The regulatory environment

Why does NICE, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, not recommend cannabis medicines for treating chronic pain in the NHS?

It relies on evidence from large “double-blinded random allocation clinical trials”, which are usually so expensive and time-consuming they have to be sponsored by the large, international pharmaceutical companies.

These studies have not yet taken place. On the other hand, there are plenty of “retrospective” medical scientific papers discussing safety and effect.

In this and other ways, the NHS is not ready for cannabis medicines, except in a few limited cases. Fortunately, specialist cannabis medicine clinics have been quick to respond to the new opportunities to use cannabis carefully and safely.

Use of cannabis oils

CANNABIS oils are taken by mouth, perhaps 0.5ml, placed under the tongue or swallowed. The oil’s effect comes on gradually and, taken two or three times a day, gives benefit over many hours.

Cannabis flower, also pharmaceutical grade, and with known levels of CBD, THC and terpene content, is inhaled using a specialist medical vaporiser, which heats the flower to exactly the right temperature to activate the cannabinoids.

Vaping is safer than smoking cannabis, with or without tobacco, which we never recommend, and vaping preserves the medicinal cannabinoids which are damaged by the excess heat of smoking.

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