

Cannabidiol

Knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of patients with cancer

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BACKGROUND: Cannabidiol (CBD) is purported to work for a variety of therapeutic indications. Interest in CBD products has significantly increased as patients with cancer seek ways to improve symptom control and quality of life.

OBJECTIVES: The purpose of this study was to explore patients' knowledge of and experience with CBD.

METHODS: A panel of oncology nurse practitioners, an oncologist, and oncology pharmacy specialists developed a survey to capture information about patient knowledge and use of CBD. The initial survey was pilot tested and further refined, resulting in the final item survey. The final survey was administered to 100 participants undergoing or having completed cancer treatment and being followed in a supportive oncology care clinic at a large academic medical center.

FINDINGS: Most patients learned about CBD through a family member or friend. The majority of patients had never tried CBD. The most common reported indications were pain, anxiety, and nausea. Of those who had not tried CBD, the most common reasons included lack of knowledge about CBD and providers not recommending CBD.

KEYWORDS

cannabidiol; cancer; patients; CBD; symptom; pain

DIGITAL OBJECT IDENTIFIER

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CANCER INCIDENCE CONTINUES TO RISE, with 1,898,160 new cases and 608,570 cancer deaths estimated to occur in the United States in 2021 (Siegel et al., 2021). Cancer has the potential to greatly impair quality of life if symptoms are not well controlled (Tateo, 2017; van den Beuken-van Everdingen et al., 2016). More than half of all patients with cancer experience uncontrolled distressing symptoms and associated loss of function (Nipp et al., 2017). The most common and/or severe patient-reported symptoms are uncontrolled pain, anxiety, and depression (Basch et al., 2016; Deshields et al., 2014; Donovan et al., 2012; Hwang et al., 2016). These symptoms may increase the physical burden of disease and exacerbate emotional, spiritual, or psychosocial distress (Koesel et al., 2019).

Patients with cancer who have pain are frequently prescribed opioid analgesics. Given the potential side effects and the social stigma from opioid therapy, patients often seek adjunct treatments to mitigate their pain (Feinberg et al., 2021). Such therapies include a variety of medications, including a combination of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, corticosteroids, anticonvulsants, and antidepressants (Tateo, 2017). If these medications are inadequate or produce concerning side effects, patients will sometimes turn to supplementation to improve symptomatology (Tank et al., 2021). Patients may also seek alternative medications for treatment of other symptoms, including nausea, anxiety, insomnia, and fatigue.

Eighty-five percent of patients with cancer reported using complementary or alternative treatments (Buckner et al., 2018). For a case study, see Figure 1. Patients for whom conventional treatments provide insufficient results may seek alternative treatments, such as cannabidiol (CBD), to mitigate symptoms, enhance quality of life and well-being, boost the immune system, or treat a disease (Richardson et al., 2000; Sparber et al., 2000). Biologic products, or natural health products, such as chaga mushrooms, green tea, curcumin, or CBD, are used by 52%–65% of patients after a cancer diagnosis, in comparison to 15% of patients before a cancer diagnosis (Buckner et al., 2018; National Center for Health Statistics, 2008). Methodologically sound studies demonstrating safety and efficacy are lacking; however, patients are enticed by success stories of patients who endorse use of unconventional, alternative, and natural therapies (Kanimozhi et al., 2021). Anecdotal reports of positive results, religious or cultural factors, attempts to self-regulate symptoms, or improved immune function (Buckner et al., 2018) may further prompt patients to perceive alternative therapies as natural and safe approaches.