



IBD and Cannabis

Cannabis has captured the public imagination as a remedy for cancer, neurological disease, chronic pain and autoimmune diseases such as IBD. Studies have shown that up to 60% of IBD patients have tried using cannabis, in one form or another, to treat their IBD.

Why has cannabis become popular as a medical treatment?

This can be attributed to the following:

- Legalisation of cannabis in some countries such as South Africa, Canada and certain states in America.
- Scientific research into medicinal cannabis has increased
- Selling medicinal cannabis is a very profitable business.

What is in cannabis that may be helpful for IBD?

Cannabis contains more than 500 chemicals. These are divided into three groups.

Cannabinoids which include the psychoactive component

Terpenes and Flavonoids which give cannabis its unique smell, colour and taste.

There are more than 100 cannabinoids but two major cannabinoids in medicinal cannabis are thought to have a medicinal effect:

THC (tetrahydrocannabinol)

CBD (cannabidiol)

The human body produces its own two cannabinoids called anandamide and 2-AG. These cannabinoids work by binding to receptors (lock and key effect) in the immune system, the gut and the nervous system. There is intense research into what role these human (endogenous) cannabinoids play in the normal functioning of our bodies. When consuming medicinal cannabis these same receptors in your nerves, immune system and gut are activated.

What are the varieties of medicinal cannabis?

Medicinal cannabis can be taken in a variety of forms. The natural herb can be smoked, eaten or used in a tea. This will contain all the natural ingredients. With improved horticulture techniques this form of cannabis can be very potent and cause harm due to its psychoactive (intoxicating) effects.

Cannabis tinctures and oils come in a number of varieties from the home made “black liquid in a syringe” to a pharmaceutically prepared product where the concentration of CBD and THC is labelled on the product.

Conventional pharmaceutical companies have also manufactured medication based on cannabis. An example is the drug Marinol.

Is cannabis effective in treating IBD?

Based on available scientific research in 2019 the answer is no. The medical community sets a very high bar when it comes to deciding if a treatment is safe and effective. This entails subjecting the proposed treatment to a large, randomized, double blind and placebo controlled trial. In addition the research must be deemed ethical by an independent body and conduct of the trial carefully scrutinised to be sure the trial protocol is followed. The cannabis studies conducted in IBD have by no stretch of the imagination met such rigorous standards.

However there is intense medical research into the beneficial effects of cannabis and hopefully a safe and effective IBD treatment will emerge which can be added to our IBD treatment basket.

Why do so many patients with IBD try cannabis?

This is an excellent question.

Firstly studies have shown that certain types of patients are more likely to try cannabis to treat their IBD. These are patients who have had IBD for many years, have been treated with lots of steroids, have side effects from conventional medication and who have a poor relationship with their IBD doctor. It stands to reason such patients would look for an alternative treatment for their IBD.

Some IBD studies have shown that taking cannabis is beneficial however these studies were not acceptable clinical trials and when the results were scrutinized cannabis had a positive effect on sleep and appetite but no actual IBD benefit (for example healing of the IBD at a colonoscopy) was shown.

If one looks on the internet there are numerous anecdotes of IBD being successfully treated or even cured by cannabis. This does not replace sound scientific research and therefore should be ignored.

There are doctors masquerading as experts e.g. Hello MD who misinform people about the benefits of cannabis. They are often associated with lucrative businesses selling cannabis products.

I want to try cannabis for my IBD. What should I do?

If you are going to use cannabis for your IBD, even though scientific evidence of benefit is lacking, it would be best to have an open and honest discussion with your IBD doctor. It would be far better to have your planned cannabis treatment reviewed by your doctor making sure the product used is reputable and that he /she can monitor your condition for side effects or interactions with your conventional medication.