# Can Cannabis Help Treat Fibromyalgia Pain?

by SARAH BORIEN

## Trying Marijuana for Fibromyalgia Pain

*Fibro warrior Sarah Borien and RN Krystina Ostermeyer look at the pros and cons of cannabis for fibromyalgia.*

A recent research study from 2015 noted that the use of medical marijuana for chronic pain was deemed as "mostly safe" — especially if the people using it had prior experience with the drug.

The Canadian research study noted that the medical marijuana users, compared to the control users who didn't use medical marijuana, were more likely to "have less-serious side effects…these side effects included headache, nausea, sleepiness and dizziness."

This study discusses chronic pain in general — but can medical marijuana help for a chronic pain disorder such as fibromyalgia?

### About Fibromyalgia

Although fibromyalgia is often thought of as strictly a "pain" disorder, it is actually more complicated than that.

According to Mayo Clinic, fibromyalgia is characterized by "musculoskeletal pain accompanied by fatigue, sleep, memory and mood issues. Researchers believe that fibromyalgia amplifies painful sensations by affecting the way your brain processes pain signals."

Because there are many facets to fibromyalgia, it is notoriously difficult to treat. Doctors may shun patients because of the difficulty in treating their symptoms.

As there is no cure for fibromyalgia, it is a lifelong condition to manage, and can at times be frustrating, requiring a combination of prescription, holistic and lifestyle treatments.

### Conventional Fibromyalgia Treatments

Conventional treatments for fibromyalgia include medications to reduce pain, such as over-the-counter medications (acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and naproxen), and prescription medications, such as tramadol. Prescription opioids are often shunned in the treatment of fibromyalgia as they may actually increase pain over time.

Anti-seizure medications and antidepressants are also used to treat fibromyalgia. Antidepressants can decrease the pain and reduce fatigue. A certain antidepressant, amitriptyline, can be used in the evening to help with sleep.

Anti-seizure medications are useful in treating pain associated with fibromyalgia; medications in this category include gabapentin and pregabalin (Lyrica). Lyrica is actually the first FDA-approved medication for the treatment

of fibromyalgia.

**Alternative Medicine for Fibromyalgia**

Alternative therapies may be used in conjunction with conventional therapies. Alternative therapies for fibromyalgia include acupuncture, massage and the use of certain exercises, such as yoga and tai chi.

Acupuncture is the use of fine needles inserted into various locations of the body. It uses an ancient Chinese medical system and is thought to restore the natural balance of the body. There are various studies that believe that acupuncture benefits fibromyalgia symptoms.

Massage uses manipulation of the muscles and soft tissues. It can reduce pain, heart rate and improve range of motion.

Yoga and tai chi are ancient use meditation and movement with relaxation techniques. Both can be helpful in controlling fibromyalgia symptoms.

**Medical Marijuana for Fibromyalgia**

Although there are a wide variety of medical and alternative options available for the treatment of fibromyalgia, people still suffer. Some may turn to medical marijuana.

As we've already discussed, medical marijuana may be beneficial for the treatment of chronic pain. Can it help fibromyalgia sufferers as well?

Medical marijuana is a hot-button issue these days. What many people don't know is that there has been a synthetic version of THC, the active chemical in marijuana, available since 1986.

The FDA approved a medication called dronabinol (Marinol) for the treatment of nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy, and its scope was later approved to be used with AIDS patients.

*Next page: Sarah's perspective on medical marijuana for fibromyalgia.*

**Medical Marijuana for Fibromyalgia**

Historically, marijuana has been used as a medication for over 5,000 years. In fact, it was used by US physicians until 1942, when it was removed from the US Pharmacopeia. And although Marinol is widely available in our pharmacies, other parts of the plant can be useful in the treatment for human illness and symptom management.

Medical marijuana is not a cure for disease, but Dr. Donald Abrams of UCSF School of Medicine in San Francisco, is quoted as saying, "It increases appetite while decreasing nausea and vomiting. It also works against pain and may be synergistic with pain medications, helps people sleep, and improves mood. I think it's a shame that we don't allow people to access that medicine."

On the other side of the token, Dr. Robert DuPont, a professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University

Medical School notes that there while there are 400 chemicals in marijuana, there are 2,000 in the smoke of marijuana. He states, "Would you really want to prescribe 2,000 chemicals in a mix where you don't know what it is and call that a medicine?"

As there is a call for some pain management doctors to somehow standardized marijuana, there is research being done to create more medications such as Marinol.

As with all treatments for conditions, the pros and cons should be weighed with your physician.

**Sarah's Perspective: Cannabis to Combat Chronic Pain?**

The use of cannabis for chronic pain is a controversial topic because in some areas of the world it is an illegal drug. Whilst it is legal in some countries and some US states, and is legal in some others for medicinal use only, it is illegal in the UK to both possess and supply.

As a UK fibromyalgia patient, I have never used cannabis for fibromyalgia pain, but on a recent trip to Amsterdam (which is widely known for its legal, open and accessible cannabis culture) I thought it was time to do some research.

A lot of us feel like we've tried everything. Every fibro medication, every therapy, every piece of advice — it's exhausting and it takes a lot of physical and mental energy to start at the beginning and try something new.

I'm a non-smoker and hadn't used cannabis before, so a long weekend in Amsterdam seemed like a good time to give it a try.

There are so many variables, which mean I'm not really able to report on whether or not it worked for me, but I came back far less pained than I normally do after a weekend away. My body ached, but my pain levels were very good and at no point did I have to stop what I was doing because of my fibromyalgia — a rarity!

We spent a fair amount of time walking around the city and we went on a tandem during one afternoon, so after what was a busy weekend I feel like I was the beneficiary of a successful mini-study.

As with anything I try, I had to consider all the other things that could have helped the pain. Amsterdam is flat so maybe that helped? I'd just recovered from a flare-up, so maybe I was at a healthier starting point? Although we walked a lot, we also sat in coffee shops a lot, so breaking up the day probably helped?

I'll never really know how much it helped, not without doing a longer experiment alongside my normal daily routine. And, unless the legal classification of the drug changes in the UK, I guess I will never know.

**Five Facts**

Before considering trying cannabis for fibromyalgia pain, you may want to do some further research and consider these facts:

1. Cannabis has therapeutic properties not replicated by other available medications, which is why it's commonly used by chronic pain patients.
2. There are no known long-term side effects of cannabis.
3. Experiences vary dramatically from patient to patient, so your experience may differ to those you have heard about.
4. Tetrahydrocannabinol (or THC) is the compound in cannabis responsible for pain reduction and muscle spasm, an THC is available in tablet form.
5. Studies that report on using cannabis for medicinal use suggest using a small amount once a day — not enough to "get high."

Do you use cannabis to help cope with fibromyalgia? What have your experiences been? Or, if you haven't, would you try medical marijuana for fibromyalgia? If so, why?