

Global first: Easing cannabis withdrawal

January 16 2014, by Amanda McDonald



(Medical Xpress)—A world-first study led by the National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre (NCPIC) at UNSW has revealed a breakthrough for dependent cannabis users, employing a cannabis-based medication, Sativex (nabiximols), that has been shown to provide significant relief from withdrawal symptoms.

"One in ten people who try cannabis go on to become dependent. As cannabis use increases around the world and more people seek treatment to help them quit, it is surprising there is no approved medication to alleviate symptoms of withdrawal. The success of this study offers considerable hope for those struggling to get through a cannabis

withdrawal and remain abstinent into the future," said Professor Jan Copeland, Director of NCPIC and Chief Investigator of the study.

"One of the greatest barriers to quitting cannabis is withdrawal and while symptoms aren't life-threatening, they are of a severity level that causes marked distress. For many people, symptoms including irritability, depression, cannabis cravings and sleep problems, can overcome their strong desire to quit and they find themselves using again."

The study was conducted at inpatient services of South Eastern Sydney and Hunter New England Local Health Districts.

Associate Professor Nicolas Lintzeris, Director of Drug and Alcohol Services at South Eastern Sydney Local Health District and a trial investigator said: "The study found patients treated with Sativex stayed in treatment longer, and experienced a shorter and milder withdrawal than patients receiving placebo."

Administered as an oral spray, Sativex is only licensed in Australia for the treatment of spasticity and pain in Multiple Sclerosis (MS) patients when other medications have failed. The spray contains the cannabis extracts, cannabidiol (CBD) and delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), which is the substance primarily responsible for the psychoactive effects of cannabis.

The lead author of the paper and study investigator Dr David Allsop noted, "While most people who use cannabis do not become dependent, those who use regularly or for an extended period run that risk. Sativex is not licensed or available for treating cannabis users at this time. Our hope is that this study will lead to further research, and possibly approval of the drug for use as a treatment for people experiencing problematic [cannabis](#) use."

The full findings of this study have been published in international psychiatry journal, *JAMA Psychiatry*.

More information: Allsop DJ, Copeland J, Lintzeris N, et al. "Nabiximols as an Agonist Replacement Therapy During Cannabis Withdrawal: A Randomized Clinical Trial." *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2014;():. [DOI: 10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.3947](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.3947).

Provided by University of New South Wales

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