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## The use of cannabis in response to the opioid crisis: A review of the literature.

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### Abstract

**BACKGROUND:** A staggering number of Americans are dying from overdoses attributed to prescription opioid medications (POMs). In response, states are creating policies related to POM harm reduction strategies, overdose prevention, and alternative therapies for pain management, such as cannabis (medical marijuana). However, little is known about how the use of cannabis for pain management may be associated with POM use.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this article is to examine state medical cannabis (MC) use laws and policies and their potential association with POM use and related harms.

**METHODS:** A systematic literature review was conducted to explore United States policies related to MC use and the association with POM use and related harms. Medline, PubMed, CINAHL, and Cochrane databases were searched to identify peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2017. Using the search criteria, 11,513 records were identified, with 789 abstracts reviewed, and then 134 full-text articles screened for eligibility.

**FINDINGS:** Of 134 articles, 10 articles met inclusion criteria. Four articles were cross-sectional online survey studies of MC substitution for POM, six were secondary data analyses exploring state-level POM overdose fatalities, hospitalizations related to MC or POM harms, opioid use disorder admissions, motor vehicle fatalities, and Medicare and Medicaid prescription cost analyses. The literature suggests MC laws could be associated with decreased POM use, fewer POM-related hospitalizations, lower rates of opioid overdose, and reduced national health care expenditures related to POM overdose and misuse. However, available literature on the topic is sparse and has notable limitations.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Review of the current literature suggests states that implement MC policies could reduce POM-associated mortality, improve pain management, and

significantly reduce health care costs. However, MC research is constrained by federal policy restrictions, and more research related to MC as a potential alternative to POM for pain management, MC harms, and its impact on POM-related harms and health care costs should be a priority of public health, medical, and nursing research.

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**KEYWORDS:** Chronic pain; Integrative pain management; Medical cannabis; Medical marijuana; Opioid; Opioid use disorder

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