



European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

Harm reduction strategies for cannabis-related problems in Europe and beyond

Structured session: emerging changes in Europe's cannabis situation: policy preparedness and responses to a dynamic situation

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In this presentation...

- Description of the project: harm reduction strategies for cannabis-related problems
- Review – scientific literature and ‘grey’ literature
- Identification innovative strategies and practices
- Presentation of next steps: expert consultation



The project: harm reduction strategies for cannabis-related problems

To identify different forms of intervention, innovative strategies and practices

- To carry out a systematic review of the scientific and ‘grey’ literature
- To identify models of good practice and evidence-based guidelines
- To identify innovative strategies and map out existing interventions
- To consult with stakeholders and experts to identify key considerations when developing and implementing harm reduction strategies in relation to cannabis use



Systematic review of the scientific literature: background

Population	Setting	Focal issues	Study designs	Other criteria
People who use cannabis	Harm reduction	Forms of intervention, platforms, good practices, guidelines	All research designs, but excluding case reports on single individuals, non-systematic reviews, commentaries, editorials and news stories	Publications in English Studies from Europe, America, New Zealand and Australia Studies published after 2010



Systematic review of the scientific literature: methods

- Tailored search strategy with a two-concept approach: *Cannabis* and *Harm reduction*
- Extensive literature search using Embase

Set number	Search query	Records identified
#8	#7 AND [abstracts]/lim	650
#7	#5 AND #6	744
#6	2011:py OR 2012:py OR 2013:py OR 2014:py OR 2015:py OR 2016:py OR 2017:py OR 2018:py OR 2019:py OR 2020:py OR 2021:py OR 2022:py	17,537,718
#5	#1 AND #4	952
#4	#2 OR #3	93,468
#3	((harm* OR risk* OR 'low-risk' OR 'lower-risk' OR danger* OR damag* OR impair* OR hazard* OR effect* OR expos* OR impact* OR conseq* OR implicat*) NEAR/2 (reduc* OR avoid* OR lower OR prevent* OR curtail* OR moderat* OR mitigat* OR eliminat* OR minimis* OR minimiz* OR manag*)):ti,kw	86,178
#2	('harm reduction'):exp,ti,ab,kw	11,459
#1	(cannabis):exp,ti,ab,kw	61,231



Systematic review of the scientific literature : methods

- Additional resources we consulted:

Databases (Cochrane, British Library, etc.)

Search engines (Scholar, ResearchGate)

Relevant organisations (CAMH, NIDA, RAND, WHO)

NGO websites (INPUD, Correlation etc.)

Research centres

- Standard procedures and recommendations were applied:

De-duplication and preliminary screening of records

Screening on title and abstract

Full-text screening

Citation searches

Narrative synthesis and construction of typology

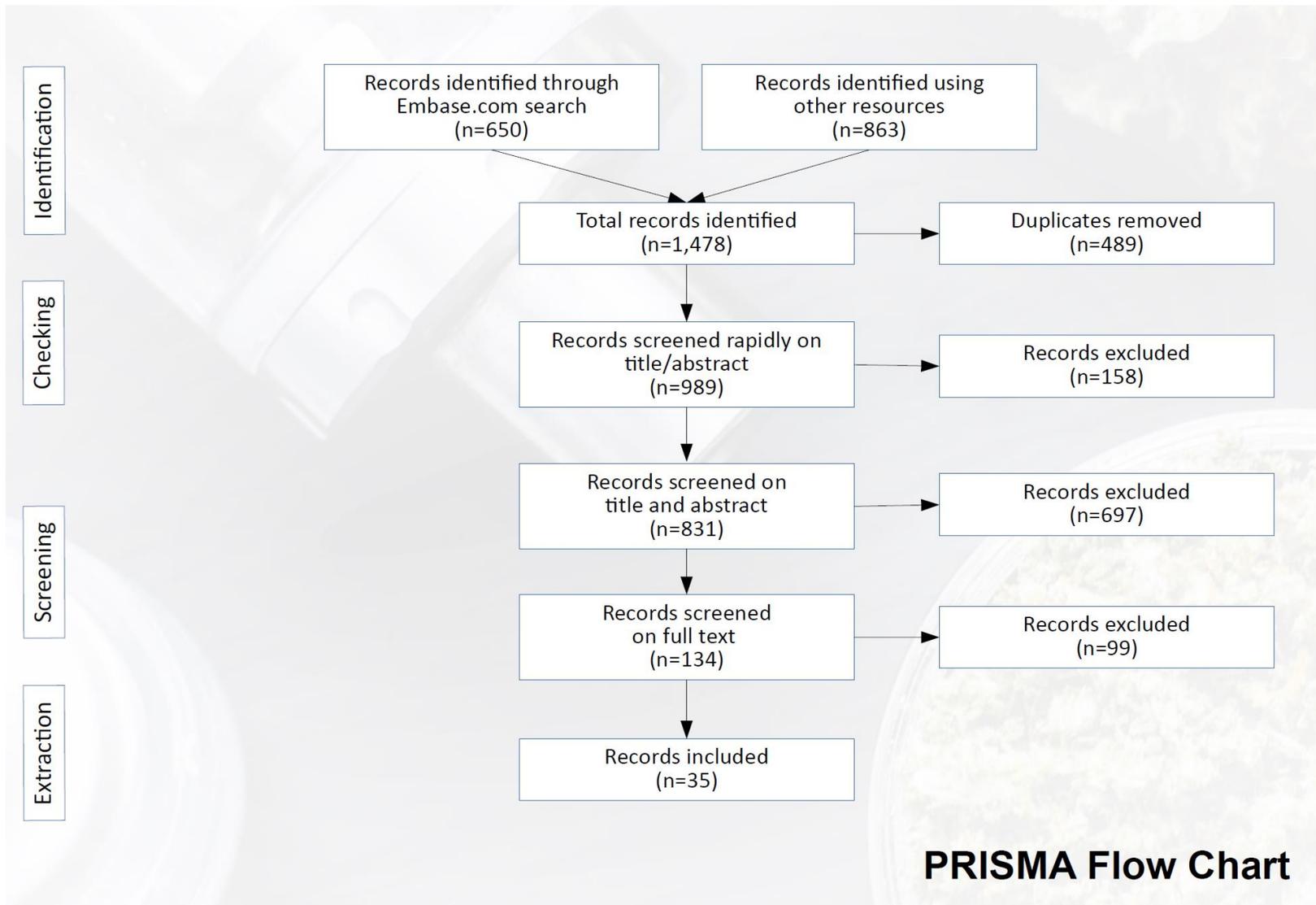


Systematic review of the scientific literature : methods

- Data extracted into an ad hoc developed data extraction sheet (useful intermediate output)
- Good practices from all retrieved publications extracted and analysed
- No risk-of-bias assessments carried out as only in identifying interventions (not summarising evidence on their effectiveness or similar)



Systematic review of the scientific literature: results



Systematic review of the scientific literature : results

Typology of interventions

Health-related interventions

Service provision, training and advice

Promotion of less harmful modes of use

Cannabis testing services and quality control

Legal interventions

Legalisation, decriminalisation and toleration of cannabis

Product, labelling and packaging regulations

Preventing driving under the influence of cannabis

Socio-organisational interventions

Cannabis Social Clubs

Self-cultivation and social supply

Cannabis dispensaries

Systematic review of the scientific literature : results

Medical/health

- Train health care providers to **screen for cannabis use** and to provide harm-reduction interventions, particularly with young people or vulnerable groups (**service provision, training and advice**)
- Provide appropriate **medical support and advice** to people using cannabis (also for medical reasons) – to avoid interactions between drugs, optimise dosage and identify appropriate products and modes of consumption (**promotion of less harmful modes of use**)
- Monitor and **test cannabis products** to identify pathogens, toxins, pesticides, moulds, adulterants or signs of inappropriate handling or storage (**testing and quality control**)



Systematic review of the scientific literature : results

Service provision, training and advice

Nathoo et al. (2021) suggest that mothers should avoid breastfeeding immediately after using cannabis, and take steps to avoid breathing second-hand cannabis smoke and exposing their babies to it. Parents who use cannabis need to plan their activities carefully.



Barbosa-Leiker et al. (2020): health care providers should explain risks of cannabis use during pregnancy and postpartum to their clients.

Belackova, Tomkova & Zabransky (2016): professionals should teach vulnerable individuals to stop using cannabis or to reduce their consumption.

Bélanger & Grant (2020): Health professionals should talk to adolescents about harm reduction for cannabis and other psychoactive substances during health care visits.

Connery, Albright & Rodolico (2014): Clinicians should use rapid screening tools with teens who are considered at a high risk.

Systematic review of the scientific literature : results

Promotion of less harmful modes of use

When smoking cannabis, it is advised to refrain from using tobacco and to use cannabis that is free of contaminants and adulterants, avoiding prolonged breath holding and using delivery systems such as pipes or vaporisers (Lau et al., 2015; Pompidou Group, 2013).



Gartner (2015): Vaporiser use should be encouraged in order to reduce the practice of adding tobacco to cannabis.

Other authors have emphasised the value of adopting alternative methods of consumption from a harm reduction perspective (Thompson, 2020).

The evidence suggests that vaporising as an alternative to smoking can produce improvements in respiratory function, such as reduced coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, tightness of chest and phlegm (Lau et al., 2015).

Systematic review of the scientific literature : results

Cannabis testing and quality control

Cannabis growers, Cannabis Social Clubs and coffee-shops often do not have the necessary resources to test their own products. Enabling individual citizens to submit samples for testing is a potentially valuable harm reduction measure and pesticide regulations are desirable.



Diplock, Leatherdale & Majowicz (2017): where cannabis is legal, edible products should be classified as 'food'.

Fisher et al. (2022): people should be encouraged to use low-potency cannabis products, use legal and quality-controlled cannabis products and devices.

White et al. (2020): Public health agencies should be familiar with the signs and symptoms of cannabis ingestion and relevant food safety risks.

Systematic review of additional information sources

CANNABIS AS A HARM REDUCTION TOOL

If like us, you use psychoactive substances, including cannabis, this information is for you.

Cannabis and Health

Using cannabis is a personal choice, but it can have short- and long-term effects on your health. Cannabis can affect your thinking, physical co-ordination and control, and increase your risk of accidents, injuries, reproductive issues and mental health problems, including dependence. Smoking cannabis can increase your chances of having lung problems.

Cannabis Use and Others

Remember that cannabis use can also harm those around you. Be considerate of other people's health and preferences if you choose to use cannabis.

If You Develop Problems

Some people who use cannabis develop problems and may become dependent. Don't hesitate to seek support if you think you need help controlling your cannabis use, if you experience withdrawal symptoms or if your use is affecting your work, school or social and family life. You can find help online, or through a doctor or other health professional.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY'S

Cannabis Café: Education and Harm Reduction Initiative

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

Dr. Jacqueline Smith, Ph.D., RN, Principal Investigator, Director of Mental Health & Wellness, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary

Joel Mader, M.Ed., RPsych, Research Associate, Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary

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Joan Smith, BSc, PhD, Administrative Coordinator, Faculty of Nursing, University of Calgary

Dr. Ken Winters, Ph.D., Senior Scientist, Institute (Minnesota location) & Assistant Professor, Faculty of Psychology, University of Minnesota

10 WAYS to Reduce Your Risk When Using Cannabis

Endorsements

The LRCUG have been endorsed by the following organizations:

Acknowledgment

The Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines (LRCUG) are an evidence-based intervention project by the Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse (CRISM), funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR).

Reference

Fischer, B., Russell, C., Sabioni, P., van den Brink, W., Le Foll, B., Hall, W., Rehm, J. & Room, R. (2017). Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines (LRCUG): An evidence-based update. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(18), DOI: 10.2196/ajph.2017.303818.

Revised 2018

Canada's Lower Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines (LRCUG)

camh

Cannabis Harm Reduction

While the research is still evolving concerning cannabis consumption, the likelihood of harm from cannabis use is influenced by four factors:

- 01 LENGTH AND INTENSITY OF CONSUMPTION**
longer, more intense consumption increases risk
- 03 INDIVIDUAL FACTORS**
genetic factors or individual vulnerabilities, such as personality or experiences of trauma, can impact whether a person experiences harms

How to reduce the harms of non-medical cannabis use

- Minimize respiratory complications**
Don't smoke cannabis with tobacco; refrain from deep inhalation and breath-holding; vaping likely safer than smoking.
- Minimize frequency of use**
The risk of harm increases with the rate of use.
- 18+ Delay use until early adulthood**
Risk of dependence is higher at an earlier age.
- Stop when use is out of control**
Frequent users who can't control their use should stop and get professional help if necessary.
- Share with care**
Shared joints or cannabis implements that contact a person's lips increase the risk of transmitting infections, including meningitis, influenza and other pathogens.
- Use caution when ingesting cannabis**
Start low and go slow. Start with 10 mg or less and wait at least two hours before ingesting more.
- Avoid using amounts that are large or highly concentrated**
Be wary of excessive use or high-potency cannabis, including synthetic cannabinoid products. Use only the amount needed to achieve the desired effect.
- Don't use cannabis & alcohol at same time**
Mixing non-medical cannabis with alcohol can increase impairment exponentially and cause anxiety, nausea, vomiting or fainting.
- Vulnerable groups should abstain from use**
Pregnant women and people with a history of psychosis should avoid cannabis altogether.
- Keep cannabis out of reach**
Store safely and out of reach of children and pets.
- Don't drive while high**
And don't get in a vehicle if the driver is high. The effects of inhaled cannabis typically peak after 30 minutes and lasts up to three hours; cognitive impairment can last up to six hours.

The physical harms of cannabis can be greatly reduced by practicing basic harm reduction methods, such as those included in:

Canada's Lower Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines
Here to Help's Safer Cannabis Use
Take Care with Cannabis from Vancouver Coastal Health
Pregnancy Info



Identification innovative strategies and practices for health interventions

Recommendation of avoiding use of tobacco and contaminated cannabis products

Counselling on risks of cannabis use to vulnerable groups and during pregnancy/postpartum

Screening for associated harms (rapid screening tools) in adolescents at a high risk

Recommendation of stopping or reducing cannabis use/frequency of use



Identification innovative strategies and practices for health interventions

Recommendation of less harmful modes of use:

- encouraging alternative use of administration (i.e. vaporising)
- avoid deep inhalation/breath holding
- encouraging use of low potency products
- encouraging products with lower THC and higher CBD levels
- avoid synthetic cannabinoids
- use less at large parties

Precaution when ingesting cannabis

(Start low and go slow. Start with 10 mg or less and wait at least two hours before ingesting more)

Be aware that cannabis can interact with your medication and negatively affect your health



Identification innovative strategies and practices for health interventions

Wash your hands before putting any cannabis product to your mouth

Don't share or "share with care"

Enabling cannabis testing (individual) and quality control (production), also for devices used for its consumption

Use a CBD quick test if drug checking services are unavailable

Mix well your cannabis products before consumption
(to avoid a strong concentration of possible synthetic cannabinoids on individual flower parts.)



Identification innovative strategies and practices for health interventions

Don't drive while high

Keep cannabis out of reach

Don't use cannabis and alcohol at the same time

Delay use until early adulthood

Minimize frequency of use

Whenever possible, purchase your cannabis from “trustworthy”, licensed or regulated sources

Stay with the same group of friends during the duration of cannabis use



Stakeholder and expert consultation

Next steps:

- Focus group exercise with experts from
 - ✓ Research on cannabis use
 - ✓ People with lived experience in cannabis use
 - ✓ Medical application of cannabis
 - ✓ Advocacy groups in cannabis related topic
- Consensus exercise with experts
- Integration of findings



