

SENIORS AND WEED

Making the golden years healthier ones

BY / ABBIE ROSNER

AT A RECENT ecstatic dance party in Berkeley, California, 70-year-old Ingrid grooved to the music, lightly touching a walker for balance. Like many who abandon themselves to the rhythm at these free-form dance parties, Ingrid swayed along, allowing her body to move exactly how it wanted. Only two weeks earlier, she had undergone knee replacement surgery. And now, with the help of a medical-cannabis regimen, she was on the dance floor.

Ingrid's physician and fellow dancer, Laurie Vollen, MD, devised a treatment plan that rapidly ushered her patient through post-op recovery without opiate pain medications.

Over the past 20 years, Vollen, now in her 60s, has helped thousands of patients achieve wellness goals with medical cannabis. Now, her practice caters mainly to a population averaging in their 70s. But that wasn't always the case.

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCE: [The Complete Guide to Medical Marijuana for Seniors \(aging.com/the-complete-guide-to-medical-marijuana-for-seniors/\)](https://www.aging.com/the-complete-guide-to-medical-marijuana-for-seniors/)





DR. VOLLEN HELPS PATIENTS, MOSTLY OLDER ADULTS, DEVELOP A SAFE AND EFFECTIVE MEDICAL CANNABIS PRACTICE.

Originally from Chicago, Vollen moved to California in 2000 and began her work as a general practitioner. Medical marijuana was already legal in the state. Impressed by how her patients were replacing their meds with cannabis, she decided to specialize in the plant's healing properties.

Until 2016, Vollen regularly evaluated and certified people of all ages as medical-cannabis patients. However, after California passed a law that year to allow adult use and a medical card was no longer the exclusive key to a dispensary, her patient population transformed—radically. “Many patients no longer needed me to meet their cannabis needs,” recalls Vollen. “What was left were the naïve, very sick and more-complicated patients.” And they were overwhelmingly seniors.



AGES AND STAGES

Insomnia, anxiety, pain and depression are the four main complaints that bring older adults to Vollen's practice. Once they arrive, a collaborative process of exploration begins, to find the mix of cannabinoids and terpenes

and the dosages that will help patients reach a “sweet spot” that improves functionality with symptom relief.

Vollen, who benefits from her own cannabis regime, is a longtime advocate of high-CBD cannabis strains, and finds that they are especially effective for her patients. The most frequent concern she hears from older adults is “I don't want to get high.” And with strains that are predominantly CBD, they don't have to worry.

Vollen is a strong proponent of vaporizing flower, and she finds

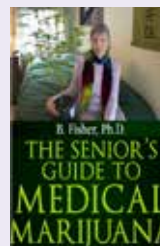
that even very small amounts can deliver the desired effect. She also believes that, for many conditions, inhalation is the best delivery method. Since many older adults are put off by smoking, to help overcome their resistance, Vollen offers a free Inhalation 101 course, where patients learn how to prepare, measure and load a device with medicine, inhale and exhale, and record their observations in a log book.

Every patient leaves Vollen's office with a comprehensive treatment plan, including initial dosage, titration schedule (incremental adjustment of dosage) and guidance on how to purchase product. Because, as she explains, “The most impressive results with cannabis include lots of facilitation over time. I try to fill the void for both.” ■

READING IS FUNDAMENTAL



Cannabis for Seniors by Beverly A. Potter, PhD, reviews research regarding the health effects of cannabis and the effectiveness of various strains for managing specific health conditions and improving quality of life.



The Senior's Guide to Medical Marijuana by B. Fisher, PhD, covers the basics of how marijuana works, how to obtain approval for medical marijuana use, how to select the right dispensary for your needs and how to develop quality practices when using medical marijuana. It also provides resources for you, your family and your doctor.



Chronic Relief by Nishi Whiteley is a combination guidebook, personal story and cookbook. Designed to help chronically ill patients find improved quality of life through cannabis, Whiteley's research is backed up by Ethan B. Russo, MD, the medical editor for the book; he is a board-certified neurologist and psychopharmacology researcher. Sunil K. Aggarwal, a physician, scientist and medical geographer, also served as a medical consultant for the book.

SURVEY SAYS

According to a University of Michigan/AARP survey, the National Poll on Healthy Aging, most older Americans believe medical marijuana is effective for pain relief, appetite loss and anxiety and should be available to patients with a doctor's recommendation. The survey also suggests that the number of older adults using medical marijuana will likely increase. Respondents were between the ages of 50 to 80. Here's what they told pollsters:

80% say they strongly or somewhat support medical marijuana when a doctor consents.

60% do not support the use of medical marijuana without a doctor's recommendation.

6% report personally using marijuana for medical reasons.

Nearly half of those surveyed say prescription drugs are more effective for treating pain, compared with **14%** who say marijuana is more effective.

48% say prescription drugs are more addictive than marijuana, compared with the **14%** who say marijuana is more addictive.

18% say they personally know someone who uses marijuana for medical purposes.

Of the **6%** of respondents who use medical marijuana, only half say a doctor recommended it and more than half say their primary-care physician doesn't know they use it.

64% favor government-funded research to study marijuana's health effects.

70% say they would definitely or probably consider asking their doctor about medical marijuana if they had a serious condition that they thought might respond to it.

(The results are based on responses from 2,007 people ages 50 to 80. The National Poll on Healthy Aging was administered by the University of Michigan Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation and is sponsored by AARP and Michigan Medicine, the University of Michigan's academic medical center. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 1 to 2 percentage points.)

AARP Takes on Cannabis (Finally)

With 38 million members and a widely circulated magazine, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) is influential in reaching adults ages 50 and older. So when the organization published a guide for older adults and medical marijuana, in a special feature on Marijuana and Health, you know the message is mainstream. (aarp.org/health/drugs-supplements/info-2019/basics-on-medical-marijuana.html)