

AES Position on Medical Marijuana

Three million Americans live with epilepsy. One-third of these people have ongoing treatment-resistant seizures. As the leading organization of clinical and research professionals specializing in the treatment of this challenging spectrum of disorders, the American Epilepsy Society (AES) supports all well-controlled studies that will lead to a better understanding of the disease and the development of safe and effective treatments for epilepsy.

The recent anecdotal reports of positive effects of the marijuana derivative cannabidiol for some individuals with treatment-resistant epilepsy give reason for hope. However, we must remember that these are only anecdotal reports, and robust scientific evidence for the use of marijuana is lacking. The lack of information does not mean that marijuana is ineffective for epilepsy. It merely means that we do not know if marijuana is a safe and effective treatment for epilepsy, which is why it should be studied using the well-founded research methods that all other effective treatments for epilepsy have undergone. Such safety concerns coupled with a lack of evidence of efficacy in controlled studies result in a risk/benefit ratio that does not support use of marijuana for treatment of seizures at this time. Healthcare professionals, patients, and caregivers are reminded that use of marijuana for epilepsy may not be advisable due to this lack of information on safety and efficacy.

There are many promising new treatments for epilepsy, but research is desperately needed. AES calls on government and private funders to support well-designed clinical research into all promising treatments for epilepsy. To increase clinical research into the effectiveness and safety of marijuana as a possible treatment for resistant epilepsy, the American Epilepsy Society urges that marijuana's status as a Federal DEA Schedule 1 controlled substance be reviewed. AES's call for rescheduling is not an endorsement of the legalization of marijuana, but is a recognition that the current restrictions on the use of medical marijuana for research continue to stand in the way of scientifically rigorous research into the development of cannabinoid-based treatments.

Every case of epilepsy is different and the disease is highly variable. Scientific studies help the entire epilepsy community to understand how and why various treatments work and for whom they are effective. Research also helps us understand the correct dose, side effects, and potential interactions with other medications. At present, the epilepsy community does not know if marijuana is a safe and effective treatment nor do we know the long-term effects that marijuana will have on learning, memory and behavior, especially in infants and young children. This knowledge-gap is of particular concern because both clinical data in adolescents and adults and laboratory data in animals demonstrate that there are potential negative effects of marijuana on these critical brain functions.

AES understands first-hand the medical complexity of epilepsy and the difficult decisions facing people with epilepsy and their families. AES urges all people touched by epilepsy to consult with an epilepsy specialist and explore the many existing treatment options, so that they can make informed decisions with their specialist that weighs the risks and benefits of the different treatment options.

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The American Epilepsy Society, is the leading organization of clinical and research professionals working to advance and improve the treatment of epilepsy through the promotion of research and education for healthcare professionals. Society membership includes epileptologists and other medical professionals, allied healthcare professionals, and scientists concerned with the care of people who have seizure disorders.

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