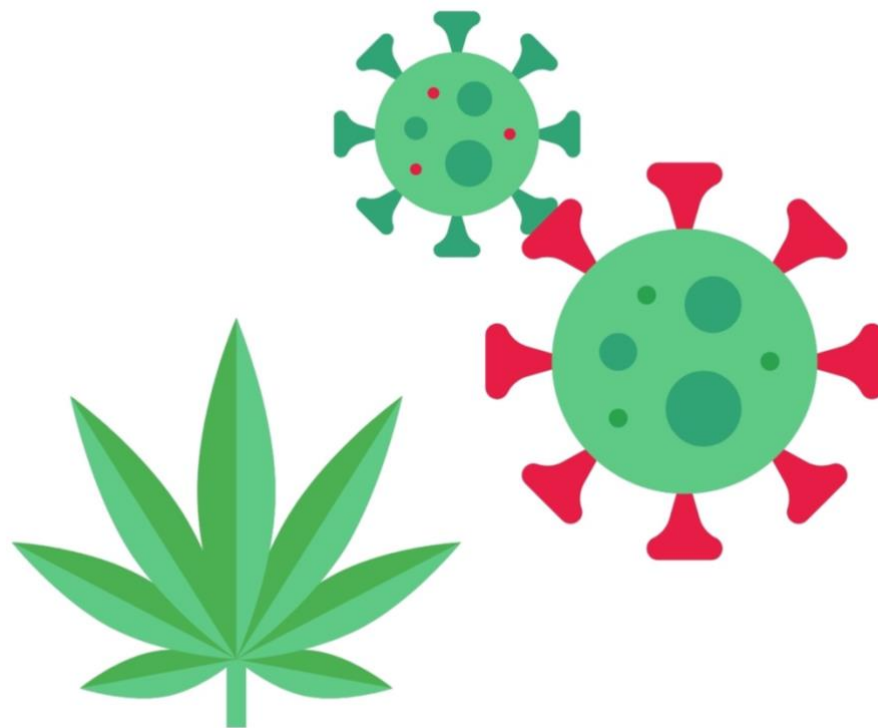




# Cannabis & Psychosis

## COVID-19 & Cannabis Report



December 2020

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## Background

COVID-19 is affecting the mental health of many individuals in a variety of ways. As the pandemic unfolds, research is showing that cannabis use seems to [increase](#) for those who have mental health challenges.<sup>1</sup> We conducted this survey from April – July 2020 in order to better understand the shifting realities of Canadians around cannabis use and mental health in this new context. With this survey, we are aiming to gain greater comprehension of how and why people’s cannabis use may be changing based on different factors, and how this might relate to their mental health. Of note, this survey provides a snapshot of participants’ circumstances close to the beginning of the pandemic, but these changes may continue to evolve over time. Regarding the importance of this research, one of our youth advisors stated...

*“The unprecedented changes brought about by the pandemic have impacted many aspects of our lives for the near future. In conducting this survey, we wanted to capture changes in use patterns during the ‘lockdown’ period, to better understand the role that cannabis played in individuals’ lives and on their mental health. - Armaan Fallahi”*

This report examines the reasons why participants were using cannabis (recreational or medical purposes, or both), how COVID-19 affected cannabis consumption amongst participants, if harm reduction methods were used and what this might mean for us moving forward.

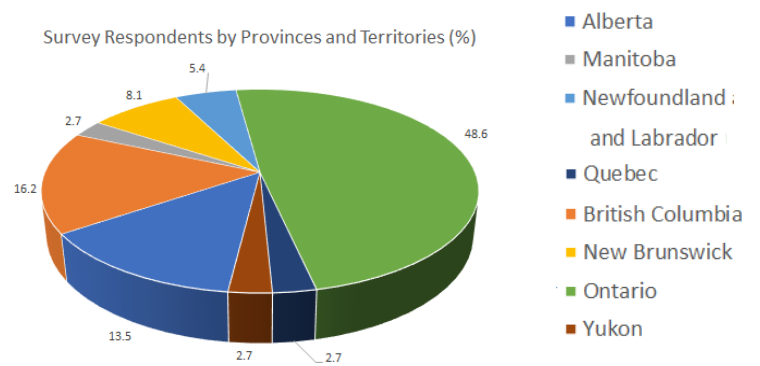


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<sup>1</sup> Denise C. Vidot, Jessica Y. Islam, Marlene Camacho-Rivera, Melissa B. Harrell, Devika R. Rao, Jennifer V. Chavez, Lucas G. Ochoa, WayWay M. Hlaing, Michelle Weiner & Sarah E. Messiah (2020) The COVID-19 cannabis health study: Results from an epidemiologic assessment of adults who use cannabis for medicinal reasons in the United States, *Journal of Addictive Diseases*, DOI: [10.1080/10550887.2020.1811455](https://doi.org/10.1080/10550887.2020.1811455)

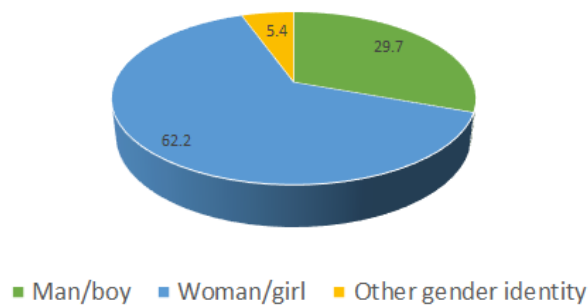
## Sample Description

Our sample consisted of 37 participants from 10 provinces and territories across Canada, with the majority of participants being from Ontario.

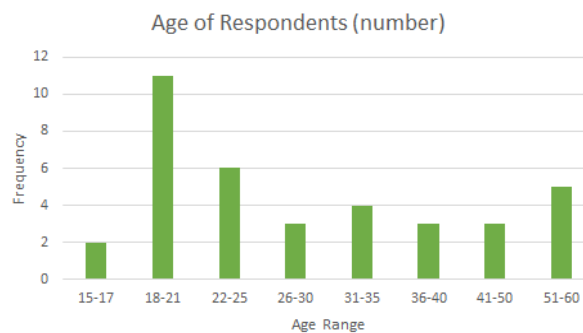


Over half (62.2%) of participants identified as a woman/girl, while 29.7% identified as a man/boy and 5.4% identified as another gender.

Gender Identity of Respondents (%)



Although participants aged 18- to 21-year-old made up the greatest proportion of our sample, there was a mix of ages ranging from 15 to 60 years.



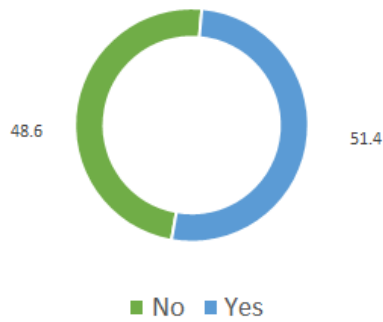
Given the relatively small sample size, the survey respondents thus represented a broad range of demographic groups.

# Results

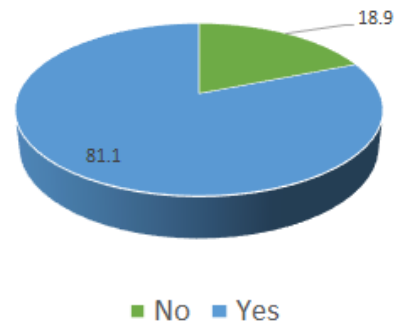
## Reason(s) for Using Cannabis

To learn more about how COVID-19 may be prompting changes in use patterns and mood, we asked respondents about the reasons why they used cannabis. 81.1% of the study population used cannabis for recreational purposes. Interestingly, 51.4% of individuals used cannabis to self-medicate for symptoms such as anxiety and insomnia.

Cannabis Use to Self Medicate



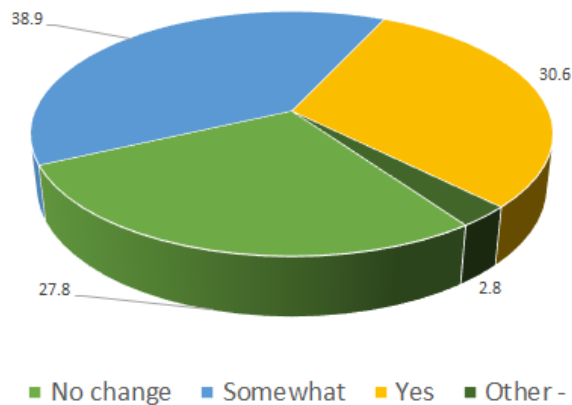
Recreational Use among Respondents

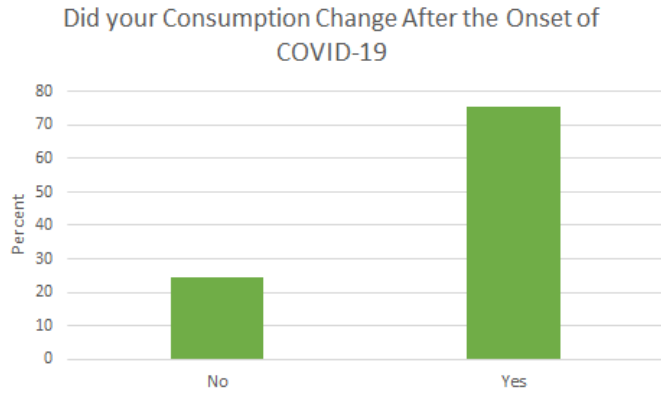


## Effects of COVID-19 on Cannabis Consumption Patterns

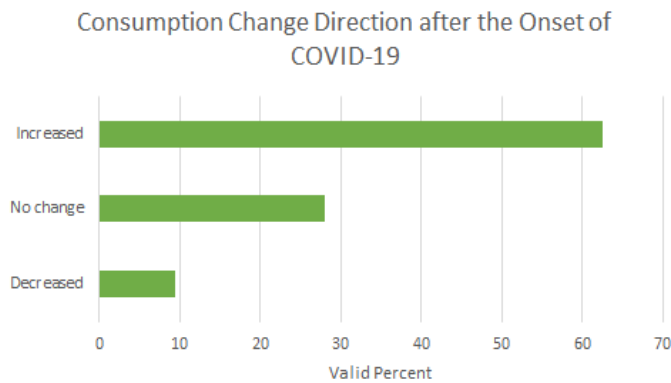
To begin to understand the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on individuals' relationship with cannabis, we asked whether they have noticed any changes in their mental health related to cannabis use. **Two thirds** of respondents reported having some change in this relationship after the onset of COVID-19.

Has COVID-19 Affected the Relationship Between Cannabis and your Mental Health?





In addition, consumption had changed for three quarters of participants. Of these, approximately 60% reported an increase in usage, with one participant mentioning that for them “mild use became multiple times a day.”

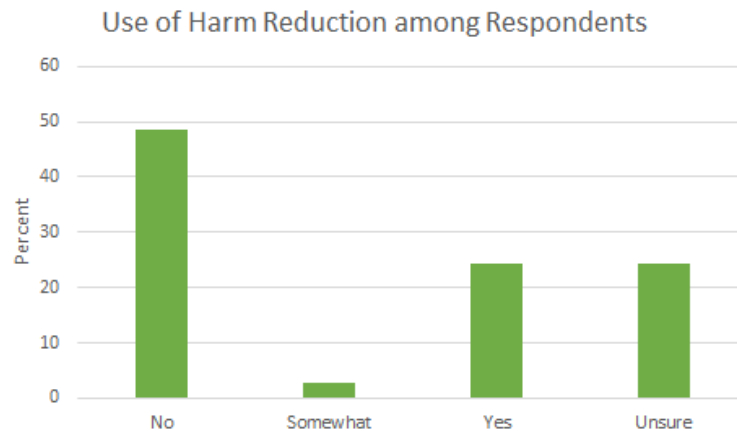


Although our sample size was small, we were interested in seeing if there were any significant correlations between reasons for use and changes in consumption. Notably, **recreational consumption and consumption for self-medication purposes were correlated with an increase in cannabis use**. This was illustrated by one participant commenting “[Using cannabis] is something to do, when things get busier I won’t be so bored!”

However, this correlation was not observed for individuals who were prescribed cannabis for control of a medical condition.

## Use of Harm Reduction Methods

We were also interested in whether individuals were aware of harm reduction methods, and whether they employed any techniques to mitigate risks. Nearly half of our participants did not use any harm reduction approaches, suggesting that more work needs to be done to support awareness and uptake of such methods. Certain participants wondered if abstinence might need to be considered, asking “Should people BE smoking/consuming alcohol when in isolation?”



## Discussion

COVID-19 is having an immense impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many populations. Early studies examining the effects of the ongoing pandemic have shown that communities are experiencing a worsening of their mental health. In a study examining those younger than 25 with pre-existing mental illness, 83% of participants reported that the pandemic had exacerbated their symptoms. 26% also reported being unable to access mental health support with face-to-face services being cancelled and difficulty accessing online counselling as posing additional challenges.<sup>2</sup>

With half of our survey respondents reporting using cannabis to self-medicate, we wanted to further explore the impact COVID-19 is having on medicinal cannabis use. A recent study showed that those with mental health conditions had 91% higher odds of self-reported increased medicinal cannabis use since the beginning of the pandemic, as compared with those with no mental health conditions. Of the entire sample studied, 38.4% reported an increase in dose, while 47.9% reported no change in dose since the pandemic began,<sup>3</sup> and while these numbers are slightly different than those found among our survey respondents, they do reflect that **the pandemic may be impacting many people's cannabis use patterns**.

Almost half of the survey respondents did not report utilizing harm reduction strategies to mitigate possible risks. This highlights a growing need for effective cannabis harm reduction messaging to reach this population. In another recent study examining COVID-19 and cannabis use, researchers found that while over half of participants reported fear of being diagnosed with COVID-19 and potentially transmitting the virus to others, only 16% had changed their route of cannabis administration to non-smoking formats.<sup>3</sup>

Based on our results, as well as other research, it is evident that the pandemic has affected the way many people are using cannabis. It is also notable that many survey respondents are not using harm reduction strategies. As such, it is imperative to increase public education on harm reduction strategies to help people who use cannabis mitigate some risks associated with use.

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<sup>2</sup> Lee J (2020) Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19, *Lancet Child Adolesc Health*, DOI: 10.1016/S2352-4642(20)30109-7

<sup>3</sup> Denise C. Vidot, Jessica Y. Islam, Marlene Camacho-Rivera, Melissa B. Harrell, Devika R. Rao, Jennifer V. Chavez, Lucas G. Ochoa, WayWay M. Hlaing, Michelle Weiner & Sarah E. Messiah (2020) The COVID-19 cannabis health study: Results from an epidemiologic assessment of adults who use cannabis for medicinal reasons in the United States, *Journal of Addictive Diseases*, DOI: 10.1080/10550887.2020.1811455

## Conclusion and Future Directions

In conclusion, the pandemic is having many effects on our lives in general, and it seems that one of these might be how people are using cannabis. As our current context is rife with uncertainty, stress and potentially the removal of people's regular activities and supports, the role of cannabis for recreational and therapeutic purposes may be particularly prominent. Public education efforts and harm reduction strategies must be increased in order to help people who use cannabis mitigate some risks associated with use.

