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People in Alcohol Treatment Programs Who Use Cannabis Have Fewer Sober Days, But Not in the Way You Might Think

January 10, 2017. According to a new study from the Alcohol Research Group (ARG), a program of the Public Health Institute, people who used cannabis while undergoing treatment for an alcohol use disorder (AUD) had significantly fewer days of alcohol abstinence at the end of treatment compared with non-cannabis users. Findings showed that one day of cannabis use reduced the number of abstinence days by four to five. However, this relationship was present only for mid-level cannabis users. Low-level and high-level cannabis users did not differ from non-users.

A mid-level user was defined as someone who used cannabis from five to nine days during treatment (5-8%). Length of treatment for AUD was 112 days.

Researchers used data from the COMBINE Study, a randomized control trial of AUD treatments, to compare longitudinal drinking data between those who used cannabis versus those who abstained during treatment, and to examine possible cannabis use thresholds.

"Cannabis is the most commonly used drug among individuals with alcohol use disorders," said ARG biostatistician and lead author Meenakshi Sabina Subbaraman, "and with the recent legalization of cannabis in several states and its growing acceptance, this finding will help clinicians gain a better understanding of how cannabis use affects alcohol abstinence so they can better support their patients' sobriety."

The study results also underscore the importance of accessing how individuals use cannabis and alcohol simultaneously versus separately and the need to identify threshold levels. Both are critical to ensure safe use, in particular for people in alcohol treatment programs.

"It's important that we look at different levels of cannabis use and their effects on abstinence rather than an all or nothing approach," said Subbaraman. "Our study is the first step, but more research is needed so people in recovery can make informed choices."

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Subbaraman, MS, Metrik, J, Patterson, D, Swift, R. (2017). Cannabis use during treatment for alcohol use disorders predicts alcohol treatment outcomes. Addiction: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/add.13693/abstract

If you are interested in arranging an interview with Meenakshi Sabina Subbaraman, Ph.D., please contact Diane Schmidt, communications specialist at the Alcohol Research Group at (510) 898-5819 or dschmidt@arg.org.