

# WISDOM

THE  
GLAUCOMA  
FOUNDATION  
NEWSLETTER

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## Marijuana for Glaucoma Patients Beware!

As of mid-June, 11 states and DC have pending legislation or ballot measures that would allow patients to use marijuana as medicine for certain conditions or illnesses. Another 14 states have already legalized the medical use of marijuana. In many of these states, the illnesses cited include glaucoma among other conditions ranging from cancer to multiple sclerosis, arthritis, migraines, severe nausea and seizures.

Glaucoma is often cited by advocates of legalization because marijuana can lower the pressure inside the eye, and elevated intraocular pressure can lead to damage of the optic nerve and loss of vision. But medical experts believe that marijuana could actually prove harmful for glaucoma patients.

"We are afraid that people will self-treat their glaucoma with marijuana," says Dr. James Tsai, chairman of TGF's Medical Advisory Board and chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Science at Yale University School of Medicine. "They think that even if this unconventional therapy doesn't work, it can't possibly hurt their disease. However, studies suggest that it might in fact be damaging."

Glaucoma experts believe it is ill-advised to use marijuana to treat the disease for two reasons. Marijuana only lowers pressure for several hours, requiring patients to continuously medicate day and night. Failing to do so can lead to a rebound spike in eye pressure, which can be damaging. There is also growing evidence that

inadequate blood supply to the optic nerve may contribute to glaucoma damage. Since marijuana given systemically is known to lower blood pressure, it is possible that such an effect could lead to optic nerve damage. Moreover, marijuana's mood altering effects would prevent the patient who is using it from driving, operating heavy machinery, and functioning at maximum mental capacity.

The American Glaucoma Society was concerned enough that it published an editorial in the February issue of the Journal of Glaucoma, warning against marijuana use to treat glaucoma. "Marijuana, or its components administered systemically, cannot be recommended without a long term trial which evaluates the health of the optic nerve," said the editorial.

"Although marijuana can lower the intraocular pressure (IOP), its side effects and short duration of action, coupled with a lack of evidence that its use alters the course of glaucoma, preclude recommending this drug in any form for the treatment of glaucoma at the present time.

"Unless a well tolerated formulation of a marijuana-related compound with a much longer duration of action is shown in rigorous clinical testing to reduce damage to the optic nerve and preserve vision, there is no scientific basis for use of these agents in the treatment of glaucoma."

