



Cannabis in Manitoba: Focus group participants' experiences with and motivations for use

By Jasmine Thomas and Olivia Peters
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CANNABIS IN MANITOBA - 2019

The Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Authority of Manitoba (LGCA) conducts empirical research to inform its regulatory mandate. This research provides an evidence base for legislative development, public education, and broader operations, such as regulatory standards and licensing and enforcement processes. Prior to the legalization of edible, extract and topical cannabis products in late 2019, the LGCA gathered information from online and in-person focus groups in Winnipeg, Brandon and Thompson. This research explored what motivates the use of different forms of cannabis, as well as participants' general knowledge of cannabis risks and safer consumption strategies. Findings from these focus groups have already informed organizational and legislative policy development, cannabis public education campaigns, the Know My Limits website and the Smart Choices cannabis retail certification program.

Figure 1: Participant Distribution

Location	Format
Winnipeg	2 in-person, 2 digital groups
Brandon	2 in-person groups
Thompson	2 digital groups

N=68 total participants

Group discussion encouraged participants to talk about their current cannabis use; understanding of edibles, extracts and topicals; knowledge of lower-risk cannabis use; motives for using cannabis; and harm experienced from cannabis use. The individuals selected to participate in the focus groups were separated into two categories: “less experienced” and “more experienced”. The LGCA anticipated that the needs of consumers would be different based on their level of experience, as this is a rough predictor of their level of knowledge about cannabis. This also ensured that participants with more experience and knowledge did not influence the responses of those with significantly less experience.

Important themes came out of these focus groups, including why people consume cannabis, where they get information, and what concerns they had about edibles, extracts and topicals.

WHAT ARE EDIBLES, EXTRACTS AND TOPICALS?

EDIBLES

Edibles are food products infused with cannabinoid extracts such as baked goods, candies, gummies, chocolates, lozenges and beverages. Ingestion is straightforward; people either eat or drink the product.

Extracts include various forms of processed cannabis, most often with a viscous and sticky resinous consistency. Extracts must be heated to vaporize for inhalation, which is often called “dabbing”. Like dried plant materials, extracts are inhaled by the end user.

EXTRACTS

Extracts are made through a variety of processing methods that range from the mechanical separation of cannabinoids in the case of kief powder or hash; water agitation for bubble hash; soaking in solvents to form a sticky cannabis resin; and gas-based processing for butane hash oil. Butane hash oil, also known as “amber,” “dab,” “honey,” “shatter,” or “wax,” is a potent cannabis extract that can contain up to 90% THC.

TOPICALS

Topicals include cannabinoid-infused oils, patches, creams and shampoos that are applied directly to the skin, hair or nails and are for external use only. Health Canada has set a maximum THC level of 1,000 mg per package. As with other new cannabis products, research is still required to measure and understand the effectiveness of topical products. Retailers and manufacturers are not allowed to make claims about health or cosmetic benefits.

REASONS FOR USING CANNABIS

There are many reasons why participants use cannabis, including for relaxation, social pressure, curiosity and pain/symptom management. Motives for continued and regular use include for enjoyment, harm reduction, mitigating health conditions and symptoms, and as a sleep aid.

TOP REASONS FOR USING CANNABIS



Pain or symptom management



Social norms



Curiosity



Relaxation

“To have a good time and to unwind at the end of the day, you know, just to kind of unload a little bit I guess. And I do have some mental health issues, so it does kind of help quiet my mind and you know, just help me relax. And I also do have insomnia, so it does help me sleep.”

a motive for use, given that edibles do not have a strong smell like smoking. However, participants recognized the unique risks of edibles, such as the potential for accidental ingestion and overconsumption. Extracts were discussed by more experienced users who wanted a more concentrated product and stronger effects.

Most participants shared multiple reasons for using cannabis, and often use different types of products to meet different needs. The LGCA’s regulatory mandate focuses on non-medical cannabis; however, many focus group participants shared motives related to personal health and symptom management.

Edible cannabis was a popular topic of conversation among less experienced users, while extracts were more popular than edibles among focus groups of more experienced users. Those who discussed trying edibles talked about how it is not harmful to your lungs compared to smoking or vaping, and how it is discrete and easier to use compared to smoking or vaping (i.e., no need to learn how to use devices such as a vaporizer or bong). To some, the discreteness of edibles was

“For many different reasons, whether it’s I need to calm myself down, because everything is stressful, or I can’t sleep, or my arthritis is really bad.”

LEGALIZATION ASSOCIATED WITH SAFER PRODUCTS

The 2018 legalization of cannabis resulted in more reliable information and greater trust in legal products and retailers. Participants talked about how they are not always sure how they will respond to cannabis, especially with the risks of the illicit market. However, since legalization, participants felt there was more control over the safety and consistency of products. In particular, many participants appreciated knowing the exact percentages of THC and CBD in legally produced cannabis and knowing that products are produced in quality facilities and not contaminated by other intoxicants (i.e., not “laced”), pesticides or molds.

Participants generally associated cannabis with having less control over themselves (i.e., “getting high”). Since people generally do not know how they will respond to different cannabis products, most participants highlighted the importance of publicly-available information about the possible effects of cannabis, what to do if they have a bad experience, and how to minimize the risks of cannabis consumption.

More broadly, participants felt that they did not have control over how cannabis legalization will impact society. There was general agreement that legalization was positive; however, participants did not feel as though they were flooded with enough information on cannabis risks and low-risk strategies prior to legalization.

PERCEPTIONS OF LOWER-RISK CANNABIS USE

Participants recognized that using cannabis involves risks, especially for people with less experience or information. They wanted more information about the short-term effects of different cannabis products and the longer-term impacts on long-term health and their ability to travel internationally. Participants expressed that gaps in their knowledge increased their risk.

Risks vary by product type. Participants focused on edibles, particularly concerns about accidental consumption by children and the need to control the exact amount of THC being consumed. Many participants associated using legal products with a decrease in risk, because of safer and more standardized production and packaging.

Participants overwhelmingly considered cannabis to be less risky than other legal substances, particularly tobacco and alcohol. Alcohol was the main reference point for people regardless of their level of experience. This carries both individual and social risks; some aspects of alcohol and cannabis may be perceived as similar when they are, in fact, very different. For example, some participants felt that the intoxicating effects of alcohol would be the same for cannabis. When designing campaigns on the risks of cannabis use, making comparisons to alcohol can be beneficial to address these myths and continue to contextualize accurate information.

LOWER-RISK CANNABIS USE STRATEGIES



Participants were asked to think of strategies about lower-risk cannabis use. Messages that resonated most strongly included advice to:

- Go slowly
- Try cannabis in a safe place (e.g., at home) with people you trust
- Plan use ahead of time, especially for edibles
- Wait after eating or drinking edibles to see how they affect you
- Set limits on your use to avoid overconsumption
- Do not mix cannabis with alcohol
- Use regulated product so that you know exactly what you are consuming
- Store cannabis away from children
- Educate yourself and others about cannabis
- Do your research about cannabis
- Talk to people who have tried cannabis
- Educate children (13+) about cannabis

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A primary goal of this research involved understanding how participants obtain information about cannabis. Participants' commonly used sources of information included:

- Cannabis retailers and staff;
- Government websites and advertisements;
- Family and friends with direct or indirect experience with cannabis;
- Medical practitioners, such as doctors or nurses;
- Manitoba Public Insurance;
- Social media; and
- News media.

“I've read info from AFM; attended an info seminar at The Union Center concerning Cannabis and Safety in the Workplace; been exposed to government advertising...”

“I just learned [about cannabis] from my usual research work which is just Googling for information. It's just tricky online because there's a plethora of information. I have to look for more credible sources though like news articles quoting medical specialists and legit websites.”

People most often obtained cannabis-related information from family members, friends and cannabis retailers. One challenge for public education is the potential for myths to spread via misinformed family, friends or retailers. This illustrated the importance of the LGCA's public education and ensuring that licensed retailers have factual and up-to-date information on the products they sell, for example, through the LGCA's Smart Choices cannabis retailer certification program. Participants also talked about educating themselves through more reliable

sources of information, such as public safety advertisements and government websites. People felt that general knowledge and responsibility should fall on provincial and federal governments to communicate current information, advice and research.

Participants had a lot of questions about edibles, extracts and topicals (e.g., How will this affect me? What does this mean for children?). They had concerns about being vulnerable after overconsumption, having little control over the effects of cannabis, and risky cannabis use in general. Participants also mentioned that they trusted neutral, evidence-based information. For example, rather than focusing solely on risks, it was important to provide strategies for minimizing harm without discouraging use. In other words, fear-mongering tactics in advertising were considered largely ineffective by participants. These findings emphasize the importance of the LGCA's neutral position on cannabis.

TOP PUBLIC SAFETY CONCERNS



Safe storage



Preventing cannabis overdose



Access to reliable and in-depth information



Long-term impacts on health

TOP PUBLIC EDUCATION NEEDS



Accessible public education for all ages



Information on low-risk guidelines



Clear information to combat myths



Research on different cannabis types

GAPS IN KNOWLEDGE, CANNABIS RISKS AND MYTHS

Many participants identified myths around having control over intake; how and for how long cannabis affects them. People might not understand that the cannabis in homemade edibles may not be evenly distributed throughout the food item. As well, given the delayed effect of edible cannabis, many participants, even those with more experience, talked about how easy it can be to overdose on edibles by taking too much too quickly. This reinforces the “go slowly” message shared by our participants that is one of the central messages in

“I think there should have been an extensive information drive towards the benefits of cannabis before it was legalized and more so now that it's out there on the shelves. Education should be continuous. We can't expect people to just read up on it on their own. So much unverified stuff [is] online and people can really be misinformed.”

the LGCA's cannabis public education campaign.

Many participants did not fully understand the differences in effect between smoking cannabis, eating cannabis and using extracts. Further, they had a difficult time understanding why it is important to read the label to check THC content. Group participants also expressed varied opinions on the risks of cannabis dependence and possible harms to long-term health. These misunderstandings could potentially lead to adverse health effects and increased visits to hospital emergency rooms. It is crucial that Manitobans receive clear and accessible information on THC content, the different methods of consumption and the risks associated with each method.



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The purpose of this research was to understand what motivates people to use different forms of cannabis, such as edible and extract products. Additionally, there is a need to understand public perceptions of these products to determine what lower-risk information resonates the most with various demographic groups. Ultimately, focus groups with people who have and/or might use cannabis provide valuable information to inform policy and social responsibility initiatives.

Participants used cannabis for a variety of reasons. Edibles were perceived as easy to use, and without the lung damage and stigma of smoking or vaping. More experienced participants discussed preferences for extracts because they wanted a higher THC content. As mentioned earlier in this report, the LGCA did not ask participants about medical use or their health condition, however, discussions often involved personal health and symptom management, and interest in potential cannabis use was largely driven by the possibility that it could help with health conditions. This has implications on future research and the need for wide-spread and accessible public education from health care organizations and researchers. The LGCA supports collaboration between regulatory, health and research communities to find solutions to minimize harm from cannabis, or any of our regulatory areas of responsibility.

Participants expressed concerns about having insufficient information. Many participants believed that the legalization of cannabis was done too quickly and not enough research had been done prior to 2018. Further, fear mongering tactics were considered ineffective and likely to decrease trust of regulatory and government messaging. As such, future messaging should maintain a factual and neutral stance toward cannabis, without increasing fear or stigma, for optimal reach.

It was apparent in every focus group that people have high expectations of cannabis regulation, and the continued development of regulatory standards and public education about the risks of cannabis use. People

expect that there will be widely available and exhaustive research and information. They believe that it is the responsibility of the government to educate the public and create the conditions for safe production, distribution and use of cannabis products. The information provided in this report underscores the importance and impact of cannabis policy and education.

These focus groups identified that future policies, education campaigns and initiatives would benefit from the following:

- **Comparisons with alcohol as a reference point for education about cannabis;**
- **Continued research and policy development for ongoing, updated information;**
- **Collaboration with public health and the community to combat medical myths about cannabis;**
- **Laying the groundwork for guardians to talk to their children, should they choose to, about the risks of cannabis and lower-risk use strategies;**
- **Providing clear, factual and neutral information to the public;**
- **Using a wide variety of avenues for information sharing; and**
- **Ensuring that information is readily available for all Manitobans.**

These findings have since informed our most recent public education campaign on cannabis, which can be viewed at www.LGCAmb.ca. As more cannabis products become available, Manitobans will be looking for more information on risks, regulations, and how to safely use these products. Ultimately, it is encouraging that people actively seek out information on cannabis. The LGCA will continue to provide information and create a culture of lower-risk use as cannabis evolves.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The LGCA expects that the market for edible and extract production of cannabis for personal use will continue to grow (e.g., cooking classes, cookbooks), but non-regulated production can amplify risks. Importantly, the availability of edibles and extracts for legal purchase could reduce the existing risks around people producing these products in their own homes for personal consumption. As this new legal industry evolves and matures, there is a need for increased comprehensive public education about the properties and effects of different types of cannabis.

It is also important that there are sufficient federal standards in place so that provincial regulatory regimes have similar foundational public safety rules. For example, establishing production regulations, including packaging, promotion, serving sizes (dosage) and THC limits will help to ensure consistency across all Canadian jurisdictions, and create clarity for people who choose to use cannabis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The LGCA is grateful to the Manitobans who participated in this research and acknowledges eNRG's data collection.

METHODOLOGY

The LGCA contracted eNRG Research Group, a social research firm, to conduct 90- to 120-minute focus groups with a sample of adult Manitobans in Winnipeg, Brandon and Thompson using in-person and online platforms. The LGCA developed a discussion guide informed by extensive literature reviews related to cannabis edibles and extracts, including risks, motives and safer use strategies. Feedback was provided by the LGCA's academic ethics review panel, which reviewed this study for ethical and methodological issues prior to it going into the field.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information about this publication or about the Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Authority of Manitoba (LGCA), visit our website, [LGCAMB.ca](https://www.lgca.mb.ca).

Or you may contact us by

Email

research@LGCAMB.ca

Telephone (8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m., Monday to Friday)

1-204-927-5300

About the LGCA

The LGCA is created by The Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Control Act (the Act), and, with respect to its gaming accountabilities, as authorized by the Criminal Code (Canada). The Act and associated regulations establish and empower the LGCA to regulate liquor, gaming and cannabis in Manitoba. The LGCA's mandate includes public education about lower-risk drinking, cannabis use, and gambling, and conducting independent and collaborative research related to these industries. Research results inform policy advisory activities, operational programs and services, and social responsibility initiatives.

This document is available in alternate formats, upon request.