Royal Cornwall Hospitals
NHS Trust

Cannabinoid hyperemesis syndrome (CHS)

Information for patients

What is CHS?

Cannabinoid Hyperemesis Syndrome (CHS) is a condition that causes repeated, severe vomiting in people who use marijuana regularly (at least weekly) over a long period of time.

Cannabis has several active substances that affect different parts of the body:

- it changes how the brain works, causing the 'high' that users feel
- it can slow down how quickly the stomach empties
- It can weaken the oesophageal sphincter – the tight band of muscle at the top of the stomach which opens and closes to let food pass. This makes vomiting more likely.

The effects of cannabis on your digestive system are what lead to CHS.

What causes CHS?

Cannabis is a complex substance that affects everyone differently. The main ingredient in marijuana, THC, has anti-nausea (anti-sickness) effects. This is why cannabis is prescribed to people having chemotherapy. But with long term, regular use, THC seems to have the opposite effect and can cause nausea and vomiting instead.

Not everyone who uses cannabis regularly gets CHS, and research is ongoing to understand why.

What are the symptoms?

There are three stages:

1. Prodromal phase (early stage)

This phase can last weeks, months or even years. Symptoms may include:

- early morning nausea
- tummy (abdominal) pain
- fear of vomiting.

People usually eat normally during this stage. Some continue using cannabis because they think it will help stop the nausea, but this can make things worse.

2. Hyperemetic phase (extreme vomiting)

This is when symptoms become much more serious. Symptoms may include:

- ongoing nausea (feeling sick)
- repeated episodes of vomiting
- tummy pain
- reduced food intake and weight loss
- dehydration
- cycles of severe nausea and vomiting that recur over months.

During this phase, vomiting may often be intense and overwhelming. Many people will take a lot of hot showers during the day to ease their nausea.

This phase continues until cannabis use stops.

3. Recovery phase

This begins once you stop using cannabis. Your symptoms will gradually go away, and you will be able to eat normally again. Recovery may take days or months. If you use cannabis again, your symptoms are likely to return.

When should I seek medical help?

Call your healthcare provider if you have had severe vomiting for a day or more.

How is CHS diagnosed?

Many health problems can cause repeated vomiting, so it is unlikely that you will get a definite diagnosis on your visit to the Emergency department.

There is no single test that confirms CHS. Instead, your healthcare provider will:

- ask about your symptoms and medical history
- perform a physical exam, including an examination of your tummy
- possibly run tests to rule out other causes of vomiting.

Being honest about daily cannabis use can help reach the right diagnosis more quickly.

Everything you tell your healthcare provider is confidential.

How is CHS treated?

If you have had severe vomiting, you may need to stay in hospital for a short time for treatment such as:

- IV (intravenous) fluids to treat dehydration
- anti-sickness medicines
- pain-relief medicines
- proton-pump inhibitors to treat stomach inflammation
- frequent hot showers
- Capsaicin cream to reduce pain and nausea.

Symptoms usually improve after a day or two, unless cannabis is used again.

The only full cure for CHS is to stop cannabis completely.

Some people may need support from drug rehabilitation programmes to help them quit. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) or family therapy may also help. If you stop using cannabis, your symptoms should not come back.

What are the possible complications?

Very severe, prolonged vomiting may lead to dehydration. At its most severe it can be fatal. It may also lead to electrolyte problems in your blood. If left untreated, these can cause rare complications, such as:

- muscle spasms or weakness
- seizures
- kidney failure
- abnormal heart rhythms
- shock
- brain swelling (cerebral oedema).

How can I prevent CHS?

The only way to prevent CHS is to **stop using cannabis completely.** Cutting down is not enough.

You may not want to believe that cannabis is causing your symptoms, especially if:

- you have used it for years without issues
- cannabis sometimes feels like it helps during episodes.

However, CHS usually develops only after years of use, and episodes of pain and vomiting can be months apart.

Stopping cannabis can also bring other health benefits, including:

- better breathing and lung health
- improved memory and thinking skills
- better sleep
- lower risk of depression and anxiety.

Where to get help for drug use

FRANK

- Telephone: 0300 123 6600
- Website: www.talktofrank.com

WithYou Drug and alcohol support in Cornwall

- Website: https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/local-hubs/cornwall

Action on Addiction

A national charity which offers residential rehab and community based addiction treatment.

- Website: https://takingactiononaddiction.org.uk/support

For an online version of this leaflet please scan this QR code



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