

# Language for Discussing Cannabis

Our words create worlds, and as such, we are providing information on why the term cannabis is the best term to use with patients, the community, and just in general conversation. Though commonly used, the term marijuana is pejorative and has racist and discriminatory implications. This document is meant to help you understand and adopt the best terminology possible, and explains many of the public health related issues, including incarceration, concerning cannabis vs. marijuana.

- While *marijuana* is a widely used term for cannabis in the United States, *cannabis* is a more accurate and correct medical term and recommended in its place.
- Cannabis is the plant's formal name, a scientific term, and was widely used throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century
- The term “marijuana” became popularized in the early 1900s when Mexican immigration increased in the United States and resulted in a wave of anti-immigration sentiment. As the number of Mexican immigrants to the United States increased, so did white people's irrational fear of brown bodies<sup>1</sup>
- Systematically, the U.S. government adopted the term *marijuana* as a bogeyman for fears around Mexican immigrants, then engineered a connection to inner-city use and Black Americans. Starting in the 1970s, the War on Drugs implemented punishing laws that intentionally targeted Americans of color, predominantly Black Americans.
- Racist drug policies and the over-policing of overwhelmingly Black Americans has resulted in severe public health impacts that span generations. This includes but is not limited to generational trauma due to parental or familial incarceration, and the cycles of poverty that result due to the economic impacts of cannabis related convictions
- As physicians and other health care providers, using the term “cannabis” when discussing its use with colleagues, patients, and the community is best practice due to its more neutral and scientific meaning

ABH encourages all physicians, residents, medical students, and the public health community to continue to develop their understanding and to update their terminology. Best practices change and it is difficult to always stay up to date. However, we hope this helps provide some background and context for the best practice of using the term cannabis exclusively.

**This work is a part of ABH's education and advocacy efforts to advance community-driven public health.**

**With questions or comments, please contact:**

Kate Feuling Porter, MPH  
612-362-3724

[kfeuling@metrodoctors.com](mailto:kfeuling@metrodoctors.com)

[www.metrodoctors.com](http://www.metrodoctors.com)



---

<sup>1</sup> Hudak, John. *Marijuana: A Short History*. Brookings Institution Press, 2016.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt1hfr1qj>.