



# **From Access to Attitudes:** Mapping Public Attitudes towards Medical Cannabis in Ireland

By Natalie O' Regan

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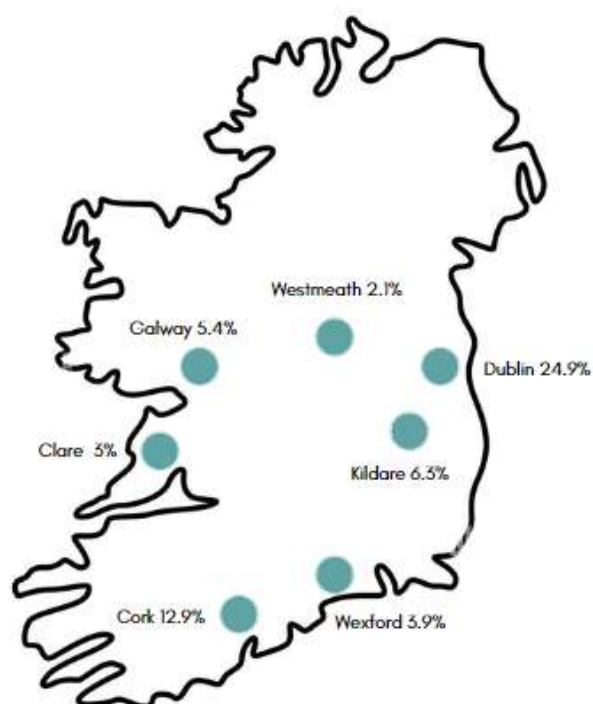
## Introduction

In 2016, Ireland marked a significant milestone by granting its first license for the import of medical cannabis. Subsequently, the Medical Cannabis Access Scheme (MCAP) was established in 2017, aiming to provide a legal framework for patients in need. However, the journey to widespread access has been slow, with the first patient receiving a product under the scheme only in November 2021. Despite the existence of medical cannabis in Ireland, questions persist about its therapeutic relevance, largely due to the restrictive nature of the MCAP.

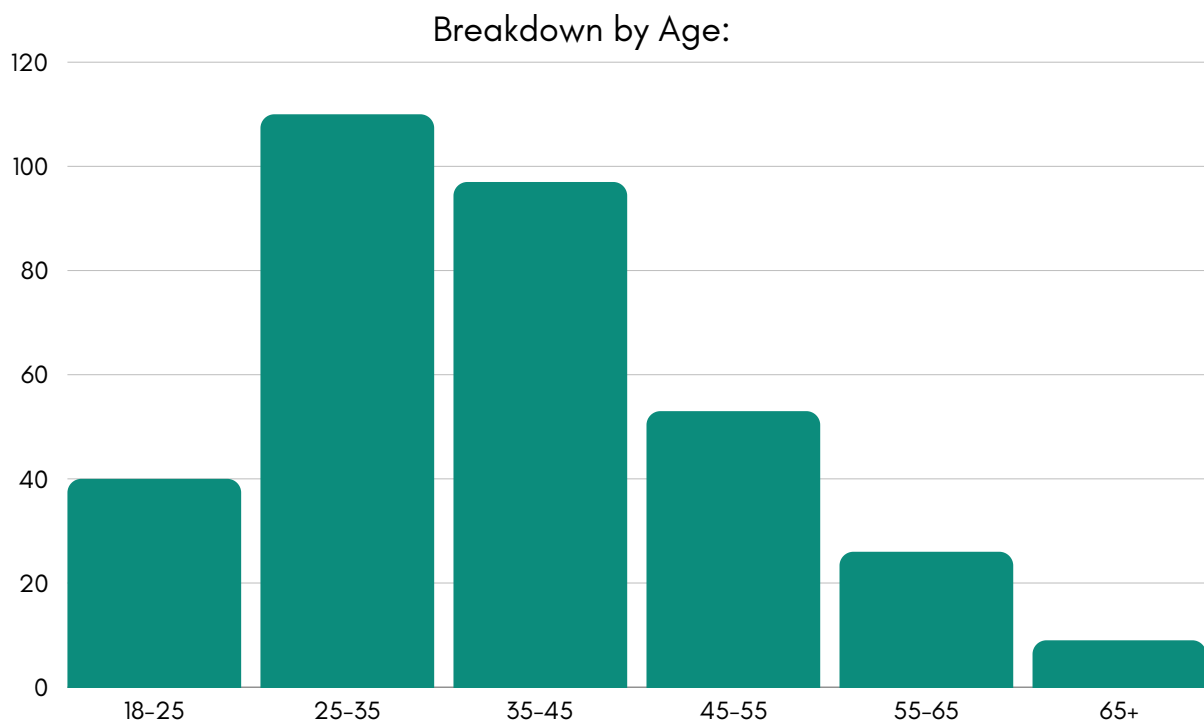
Anticipating the Government's 5-year review of the MCAP slated for the end of 2023, this study embarks on a mission to unveil the attitudes and opinions surrounding medical cannabis in Ireland. The goal is to identify potential patients who might benefit from medical cannabis, and understand the prevalence of cannabis use as a treatment, both through prescription and illicit means.

The survey, conducted between July 21, 2023, and August 21, 2023, garnered insights from 336 responses from Irish adults. The regional breakdown of survey participants is reflective of the demographic distribution across Irish counties.

Breakdown by Region:



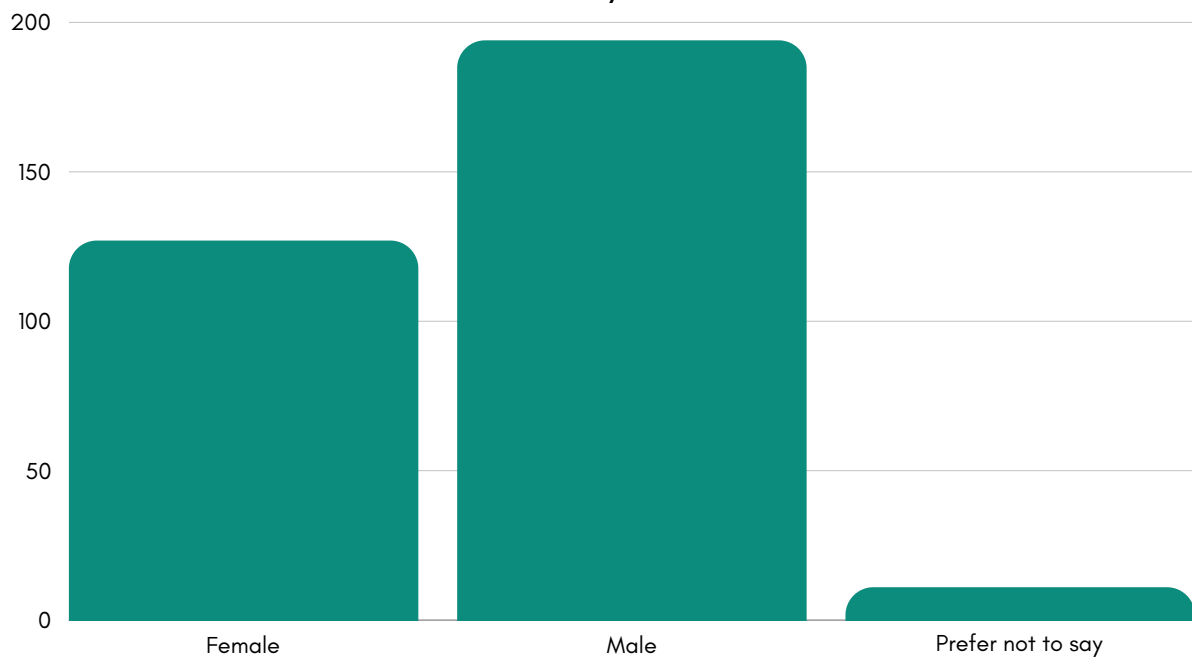
The age profile of survey participants reveals a diverse range of perspectives, with the majority of responses concentrated in the 25–35 and 35–45 age groups. This demographic distribution is noteworthy, as it captures the insights and opinions of individuals within key stages of adulthood, offering a nuanced understanding of attitudes toward medical cannabis among those who are likely to be actively engaged in healthcare decisions for themselves and potentially for their families. Understanding their attitudes toward medical cannabis provides insights into preferences and considerations in healthcare choices.



Understanding the long-term impact of medical cannabis necessitates exploring its association with chronic health conditions, often more prevalent or diagnosed in older age. By delving into the perspectives of individuals across various age groups, the survey seeks to illuminate potential future trends in the acceptance and usage of medical cannabis.

Understanding the gender composition of participants is crucial in ensuring a comprehensive analysis of attitudes toward medical cannabis. Variances in opinions, concerns, or preferences may exist between genders, and acknowledging these distinctions is vital for tailoring medical cannabis policies and interventions. Additionally, it contributes to inclusivity in healthcare discussions, helping to create more personalised and effective approaches that consider the diverse needs and perspectives of all genders within the context of medical cannabis use.

Breakdown by Gender:



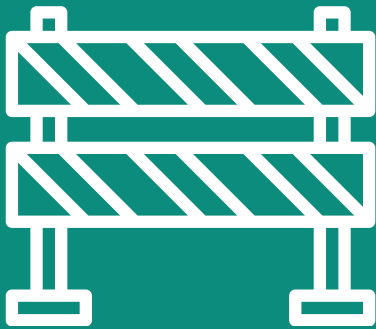
Differences in medical cannabis interventions for men and women arise from biological variations and societal factors. Biologically, hormonal and metabolic distinctions can affect how each gender responds to cannabis compounds.

Additionally, social and cultural factors, including health perceptions and treatment preferences, play a role. Tailoring medical cannabis interventions to the unique needs and preferences of men and women ensures personalised and effective healthcare, considering both biological and social aspects.

# Survey Highlights

## Limited Awareness of Legal Access

Surprisingly, **48%** of respondents are unaware of the legal avenues available for accessing medical cannabis, indicating a substantial gap in public knowledge.



## Untapped Potential

Despite **96%** of participants expressing a willingness to consider cannabis as a treatment option, only 0.9% have been prescribed medical cannabis, suggesting untapped potential in utilising cannabis for various health conditions.

## Self-Medication Risks

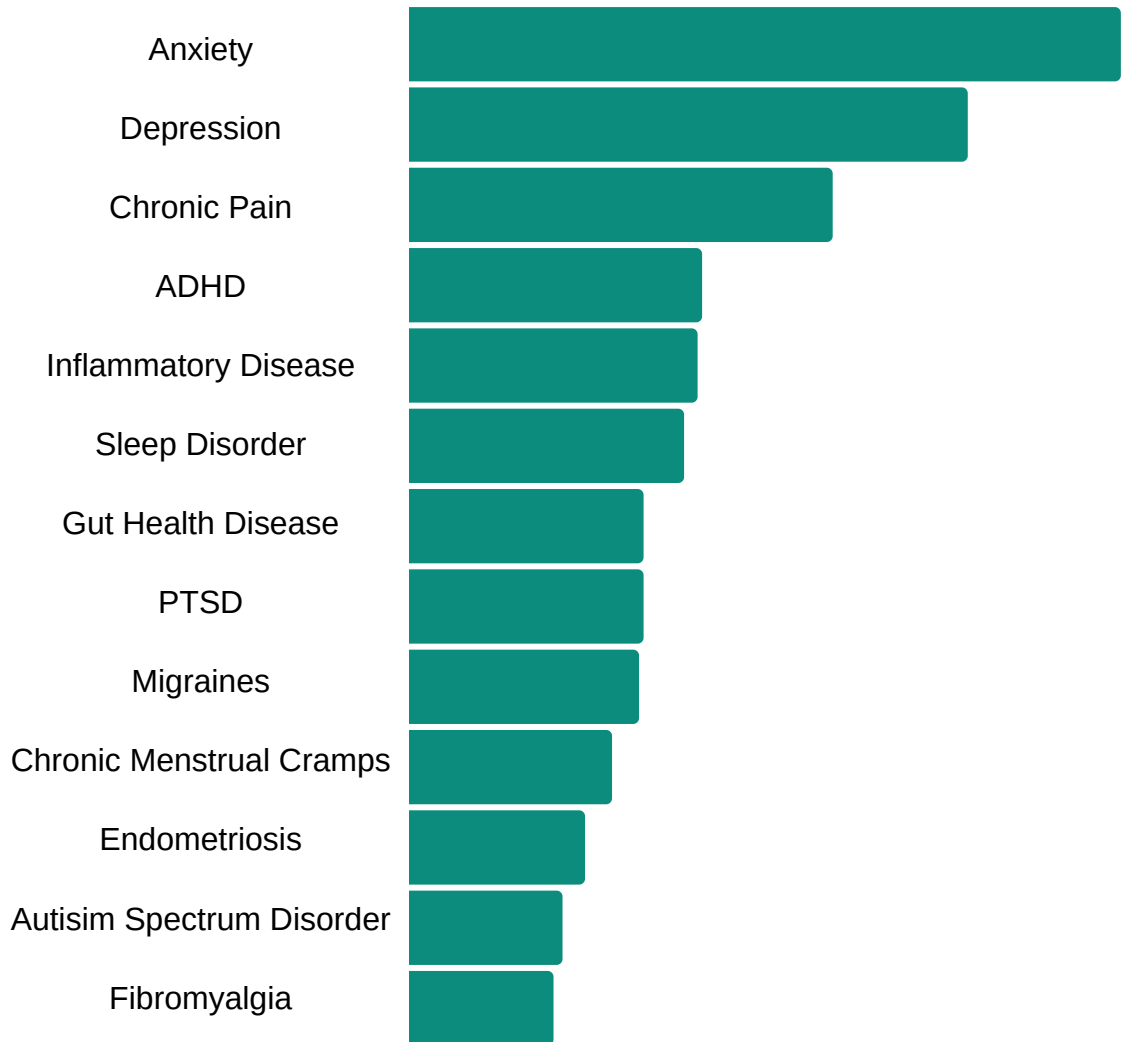
Alarmingly, **85%** of respondents admitted to using cannabis to self-medicate without a prescription, raising concerns about reliance on unregulated substances and potential legal consequences.



## Concerns about Social Stigma

A considerable **58%** expressed concerns about interactions with law enforcement regarding their medical cannabis use, highlighting the lingering social stigma associated with cannabis, even in the context of medical treatment.

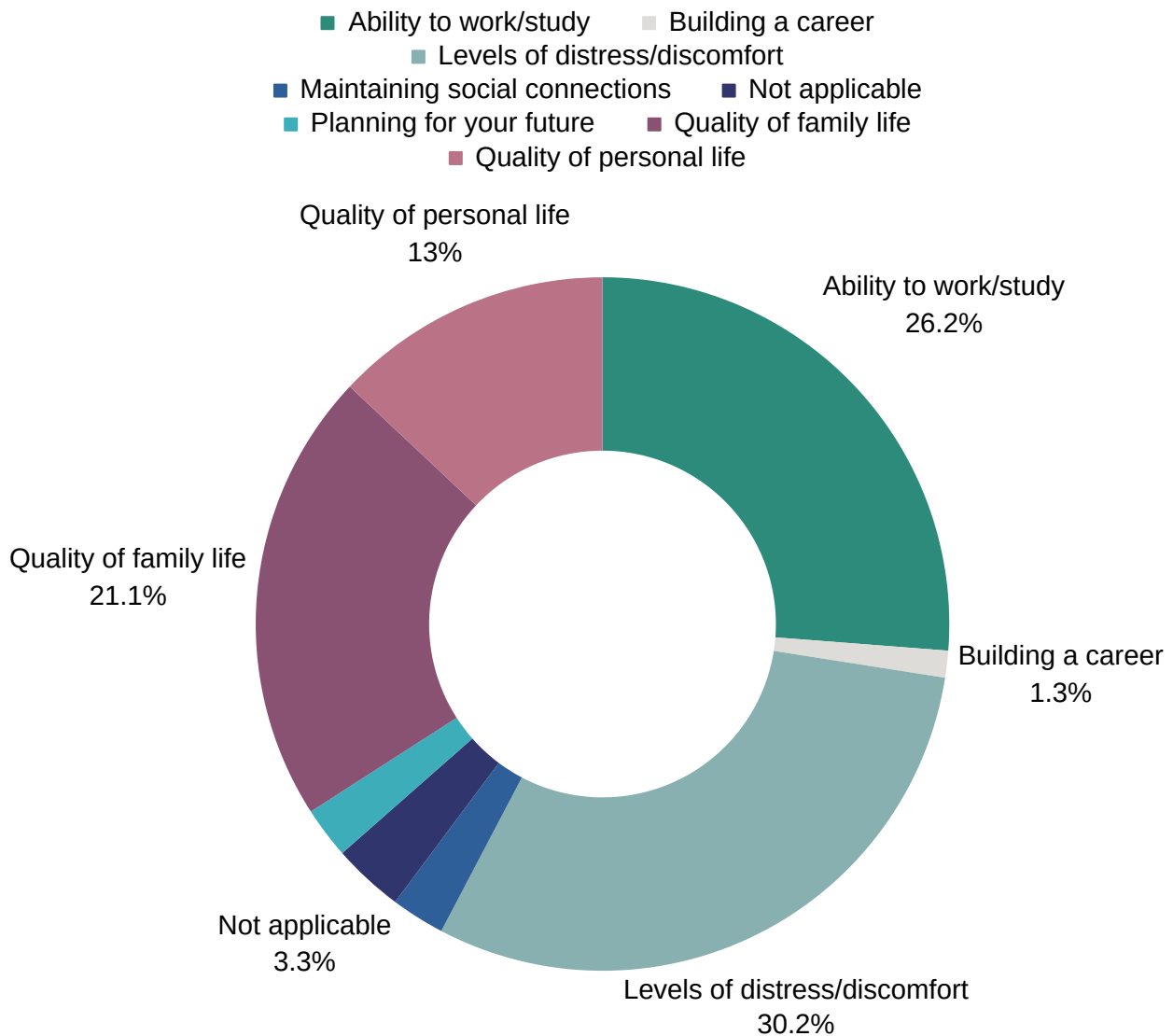
# Treatable Conditions



In Ireland, a significant number of individuals grapple with various health conditions, with our survey revealing that 75% of respondents have a diagnosed treatable condition. The prevalence of enduring health challenges is substantial, with over 1.1 million people, constituting 22% of the population, reporting long-lasting health conditions. In 2019, 28% reported having at least one chronic condition, suggesting an estimated 1.4 million people in Ireland who might find relief in medical cannabis.

Our survey highlights that conditions like Anxiety (15.4%), Chronic Pain (9.16%), Inflammatory Diseases (6.24%), Chronic Menstrual Cramps (4.4%), and Gut Health Issues (5.1%) are among the most common. Each of these conditions holds the potential to be treatable or manageable with medical cannabis. Additionally, the survey identified smaller yet significant numbers of respondents dealing with conditions such as Endometriosis, Migraines, PTSD, Sleep Disorders, Autism, ADHD, and Multiple Sclerosis. This data underscores the untapped potential of medical cannabis in addressing a spectrum of health challenges in Ireland.

# Impact of Medical Conditions



The research delved into the profound impact that diagnosed health conditions have on individuals' lives. Among the diverse array of conditions, chronic pain emerged as particularly impactful, significantly affecting day-to-day living experiences and potentially hindering future plans. A striking revelation was that 97% of respondents with a diagnosed condition acknowledged its influence on various facets of their lives, including work or study, family life, and personal well-being. Notably, 30% expressed that their conditions significantly contributed to heightened distress and discomfort. Chronic pain, endometriosis, chronic menstrual cramps, and inflammatory diseases were identified as the most challenging conditions, closely followed by sleep disorders, anxiety, and fibromyalgia. This underscores the multifaceted ways in which health conditions can profoundly shape individuals' daily realities and emotional well-being.

# Impact of Medical Conditions

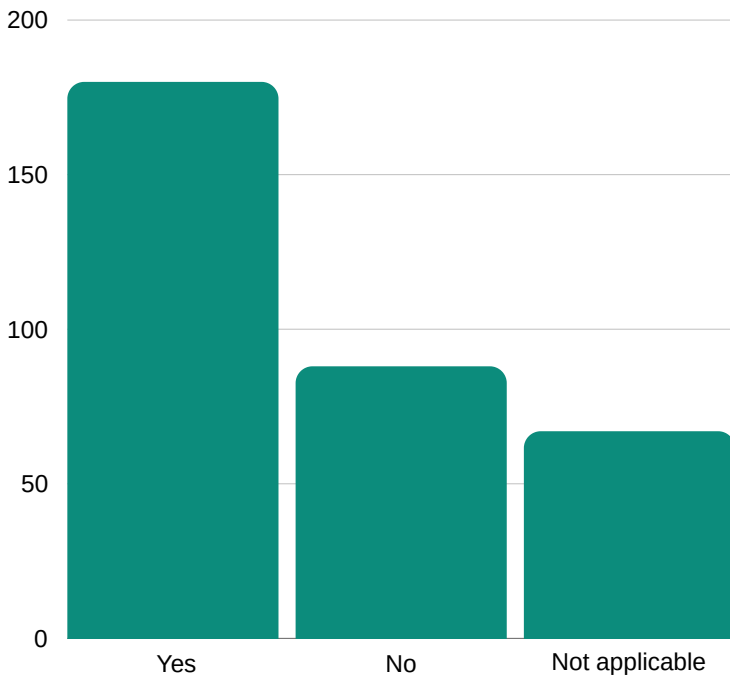
This study uncovered conditions that have pervasive impacts across various aspects of individuals' lives, indicating that current treatments may fall short of meeting patients' needs. It underscores the importance of enhancing accessibility to more effective treatments, such as medical cannabis, for those opting for alternative methods. Extensive research has demonstrated the efficacy of medical cannabis in treating and managing a diverse range of conditions. Presently, individuals might be foregoing opportunities for fulfilling relationships with family and friends, whereas treatments like medical cannabis could offer relief from symptoms, enabling them to actively engage and build social connections within their circles.





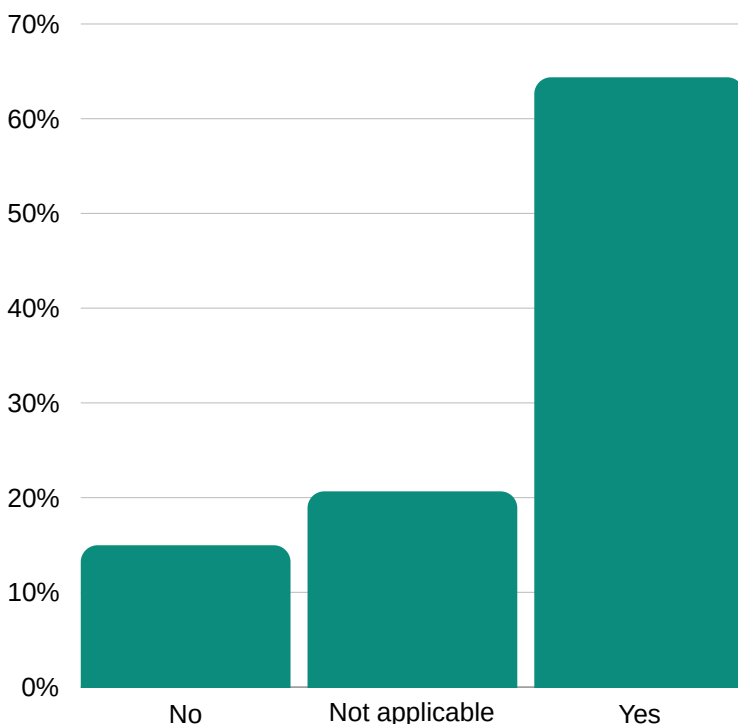
# Side Effects From Medication

Do you suffer side effects from treatment?



The study emphasised that a significant portion of participants encounter side effects from their current treatments, underscoring the necessity of providing individuals with the choice to explore alternative approaches for symptom management. Patients dealing with pain are frequently prescribed potent painkillers and the accompanying side effects of these medications may contribute to prolonged dependency. Conditions characterised by pain symptoms, including chronic pain, fibromyalgia, endometriosis, and chronic menstrual cramps, showed a higher incidence of side effects. Similar trends were observed in individuals diagnosed with cancer, and those grappling with PTSD, anxiety, and inflammatory diseases.

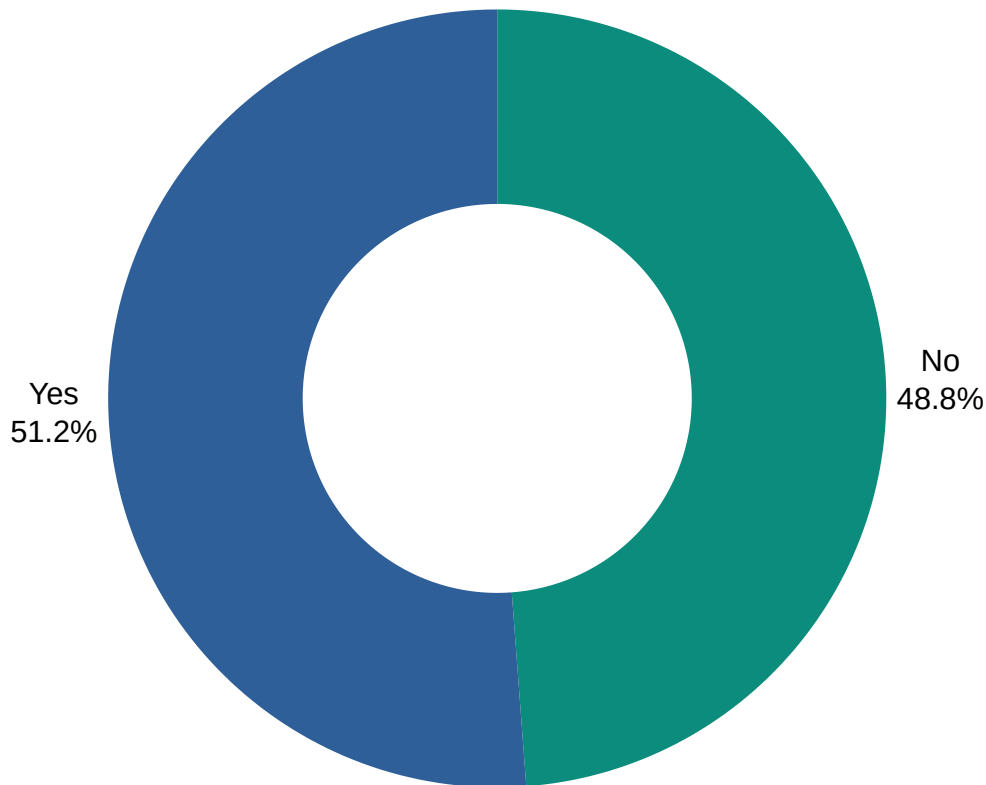
Are you concerned about the long term side effects?



The research also brought to light that 65% of participants expressed concerns about the potential long-term side effects associated with their current medications. This aspect underscores the need for medical interventions that effectively address symptoms and mitigate the apprehension surrounding potential adverse effects over an extended duration.

# Awareness

Are you aware of the legal route to access cannabis as a medicine ?



In our survey, we inquired whether participants were aware of the legal pathway to access medical cannabis. Despite the availability of medical cannabis since 2016 and the existence of the MCAP program for the last number of years, a surprising 48% of respondents are unaware of this legal option. Notably, the majority of those lacking awareness were aged over 35, indicating that the younger demographic is more informed and interested in cannabis overall. It is plausible that social media significantly contributes to awareness among the younger cohort.

This suggests a substantial need for increased efforts to inform the general population about the availability of medical cannabis as a treatment. Furthermore, it's noteworthy that all participants unaware of the legal route to access medical cannabis had conditions that could potentially benefit from it, such as chronic pain and inflammatory diseases. These findings also hint at a possible overlap in people's minds between medical cannabis and the current classification of cannabis as an illegal substance.

# Access

Having access to medical cannabis is deemed invaluable for several reasons. Firstly, it offers an alternative treatment avenue for individuals facing chronic health conditions. Traditional medications often come with significant side effects and long-term concerns, while medical cannabis presents a potentially safer and more tolerable option. Moreover, the survey results indicate a high level of willingness among participants to consider medical cannabis as a treatment. This signifies a growing acceptance of cannabis as a legitimate therapeutic option, potentially fostering a more open dialogue between patients and healthcare professionals.

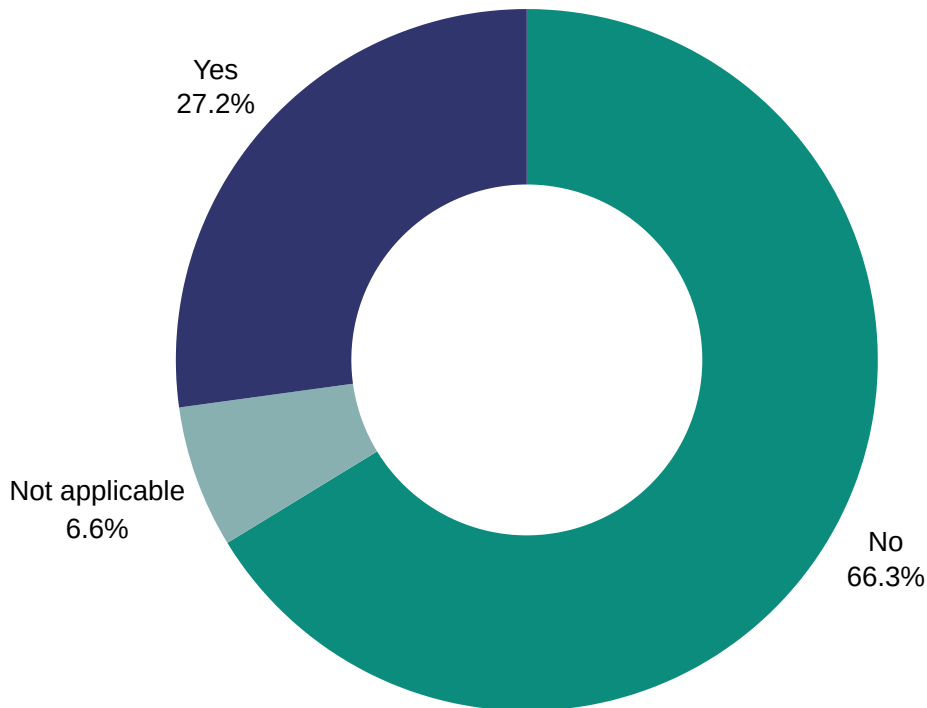
Access to medical cannabis is not just about providing relief from symptoms; it's about empowering individuals to make informed choices regarding their healthcare. It represents a departure from conventional treatments, which might not adequately address patients' needs or preferences.

Furthermore, for those who have resorted to self-medicating with unregulated cannabis, having legal and regulated access ensures a standardised product with known composition and dosage information. This mitigates risks associated with the black market, such as unknowingly consuming harmful substances or facing legal consequences for cultivation or possession.



# Access

Have you talked to a health professional about medical cannabis?



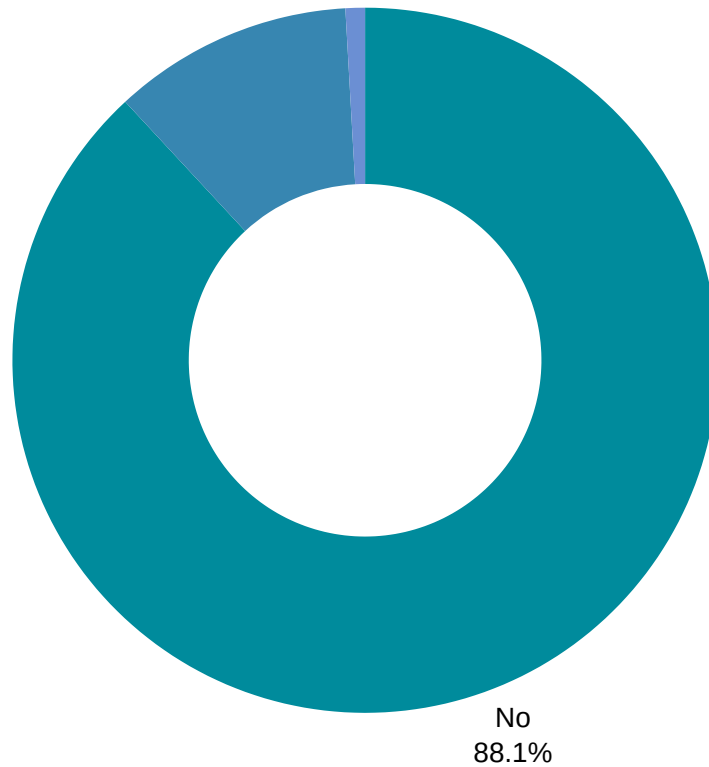
The survey results reveal a significant gap in open discussions about medical cannabis with health professionals. A substantial 66% of participants admitted to not having such conversations, while merely 27% reported engaging in dialogue. These findings underscore persistent barriers impeding individuals from openly discussing medical cannabis with their healthcare providers. Social hurdles, particularly stigma and the prevailing negative perspectives some professionals maintain regarding medical cannabis, stand out as primary obstacles.

These barriers act as deterrents, preventing individuals from accessing potential treatments that could alleviate their symptoms effectively. Overcoming these societal and professional biases is crucial to fostering open and informed conversations about medical cannabis as a viable therapeutic option.

# Access

Have you been prescribed cannabis as a medicine?

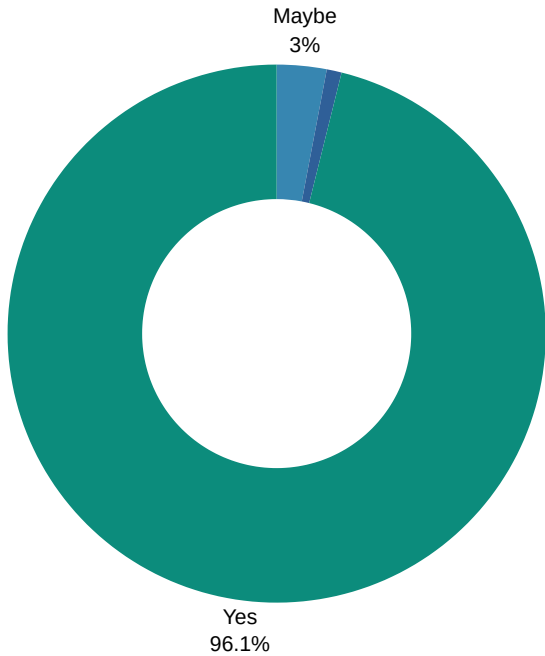
Sought prescription but was refused  
11%



These survey results highlight a stark reality: a mere 0.9% of participants reported being prescribed medical cannabis, while 11% sought a prescription but faced refusal. Extrapolating this percentage to Ireland's population of 5 million would suggest 45,000 individuals, a stark contrast to the current reality where only 50 people have access to the MCAP programme. This stark contrast raises concerns about individuals with conditions that could benefit from medical cannabis but are evidently meeting barriers to explore this therapeutic option. Understanding the reasons behind this reluctance and working to address barriers to access are vital steps in ensuring that those who could benefit from medical cannabis are not left without a potentially valuable treatment.

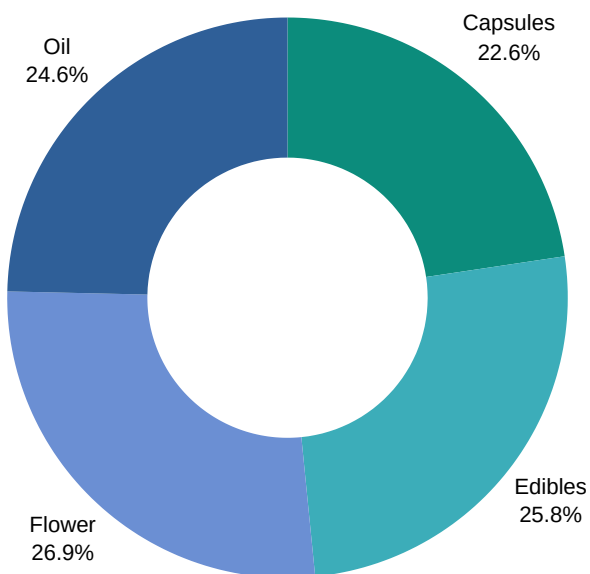
# Attitudes

Would you consider cannabis as a treatment?



The survey unveiled a striking trend: an overwhelming 96% of participants expressed openness to considering cannabis as a potential treatment for their conditions. This resounding majority underscores a significant willingness among respondents to explore cannabis as a therapeutic option. The high level of receptivity suggests a growing recognition among individuals that cannabis might hold promise in managing their health conditions. This notable inclination merits attention from both healthcare professionals and policymakers as they navigate discussions around medical cannabis and work toward more patient-centric healthcare approaches.

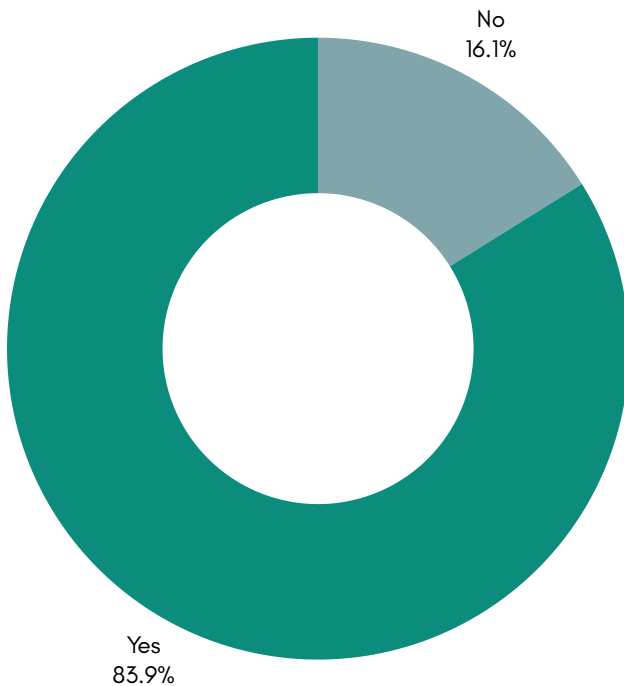
What form of medical cannabis would be acceptable to you?



In evaluating the preferred types of medical cannabis, participants exhibited an even distribution of acceptance across various forms, including flowers, capsules, edibles, and oil. Remarkably, the majority of participants expressed comfort with all four options, indicating a certain level of openness and lack of specific apprehension regarding the method of intake for medical cannabis. The older 45+ age cohort did show a preference for oil and capsules, with the younger groups preferring flower and edibles. This diverse acceptance suggests that individuals seeking medical cannabis treatment might be adaptable to different forms, offering flexibility for healthcare providers to tailor treatment plans based on patient preferences.

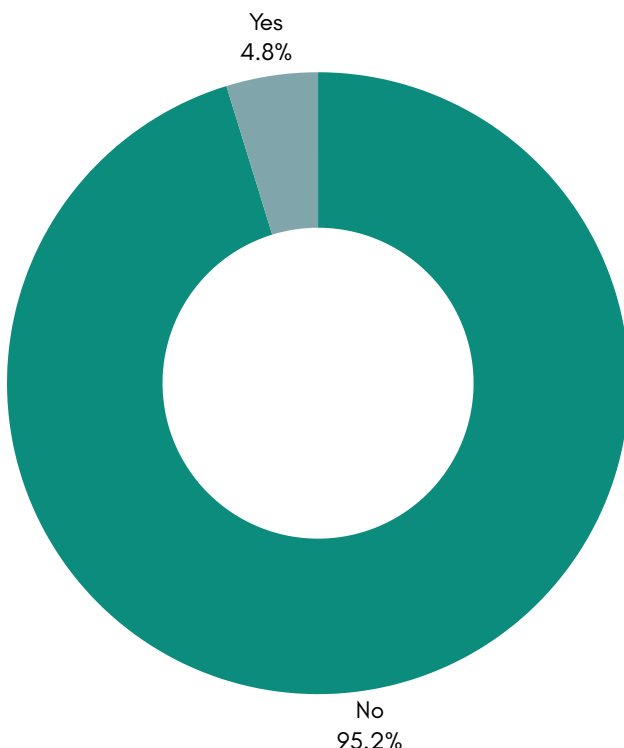
# Attitudes

Do you/ Have you used cannabis to treat a condition without a prescription?



Inquiring about self-treatment practices among those with medical conditions, a concerning 85% admitted to utilising cannabis without a prescription. This raises significant apprehensions as individuals resort to an unregulated substance for self-medication. Relying on cannabis from the black market exposes patients to various risks. Not only are they unaware of the composition of the cannabis they obtain, but they also lack information on potency and dosage, posing serious health hazards. Furthermore, individuals opting to grow their own cannabis face legal repercussions, risking arrest for possession and potential prosecution for the sale and supply of an illegal substance, particularly if the quantity is deemed substantial.

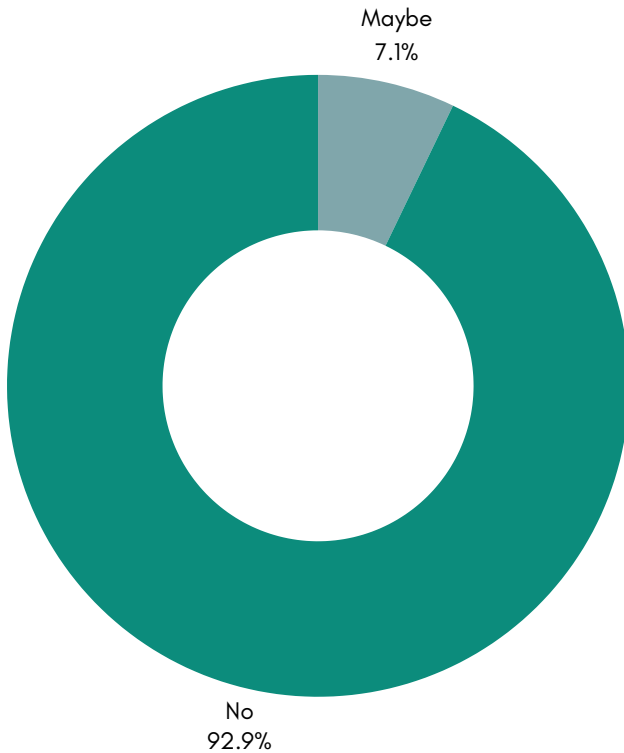
Would you be concerned about taking medical cannabis to treat a condition?



When posed with the question, "Would you be concerned about taking medical cannabis to treat a condition?" an overwhelming 95% responded with a resounding "no." This stark contrast to the earlier findings on the side effects and long-term concerns associated with conventional treatments is noteworthy. It underscores a significant level of confidence and openness among respondents toward medical cannabis as a treatment option. This suggests that, despite reservations about traditional medications, individuals appear more receptive to the idea of utilising medical cannabis, indicating a potential shift in attitudes and a growing acceptance of alternative therapeutic approaches.

# Attitudes

Do you think medical cannabis is harmful?



A resounding 92.9% of respondents expressed a belief that medical cannabis is not harmful, with a notable absence of any respondents indicating otherwise. This resolute stance underscores a prevailing perception among participants that medical cannabis, when used as a treatment option, is considered safe. The absence of dissenting opinions reflects a collective confidence in the safety profile of medical cannabis, perhaps influenced by growing awareness of its therapeutic potential and an evolving understanding of its application in healthcare.

Would you be concerned about being questioned by Gardai about your medical cannabis?

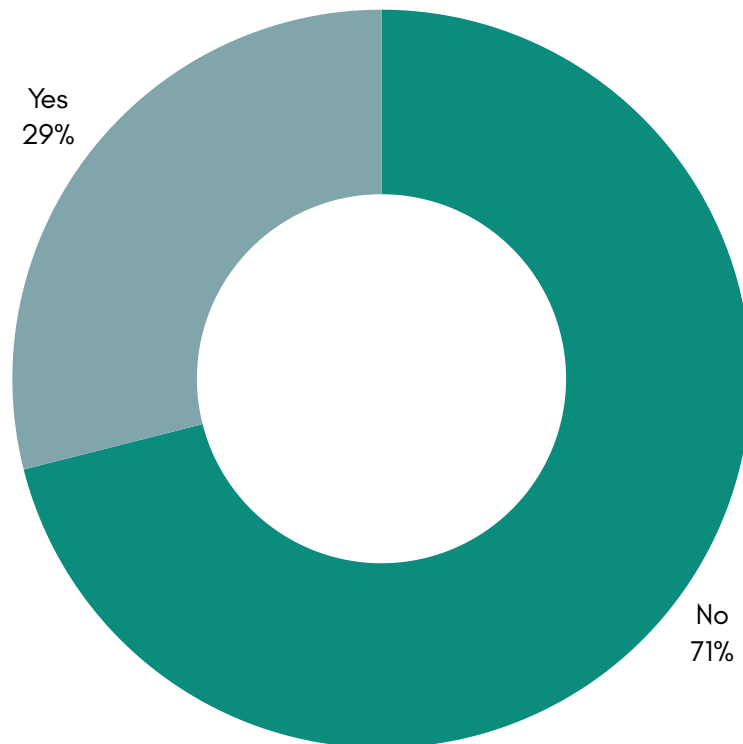


When participants were questioned about potential encounters with law enforcement regarding their medical cannabis use, a noteworthy 58% expressed apprehension. This concern was uniformly distributed across various age groups and genders, indicating a widespread worry about legal repercussions associated with medical cannabis. The consistent level of unease suggests that regardless of age or gender, individuals using medical cannabis are apprehensive about potential interactions with law enforcement, highlighting a shared anxiety regarding the legal landscape surrounding medical cannabis use.



# Attitudes

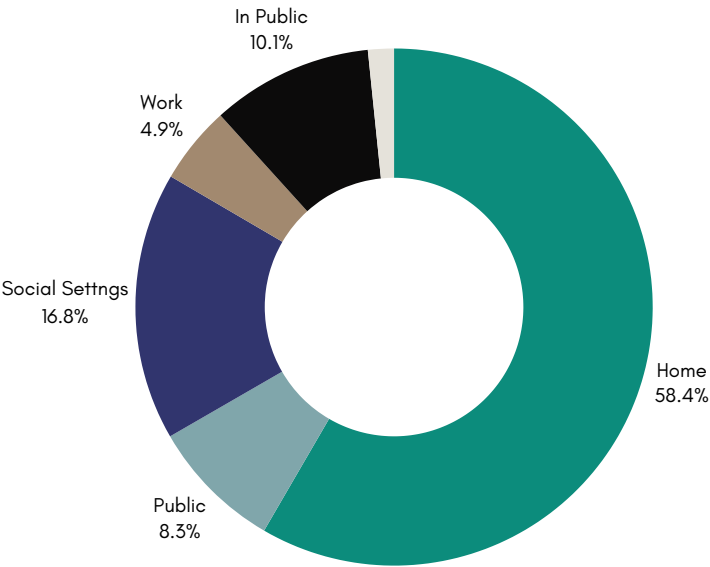
Would you be concerned about the social stigma of cannabis ?



When questioned about potential concerns regarding the social stigma associated with cannabis use, a considerable 71% responded in the negative. However, this finding, in contrast to other aspects of the research, is surprising. It suggests that despite widespread public support for medical cannabis, there persists a perception among patients that they might face societal stigma for using cannabis as medicine. This concern was more pronounced among females and participants aged 18–45, indicating that certain demographics may be more apprehensive about potential judgment related to medical cannabis use. Despite evolving public attitudes, the survey highlights a lingering perception among patients that societal stigma could still be a barrier to the acceptance of cannabis as a legitimate form of medicine.

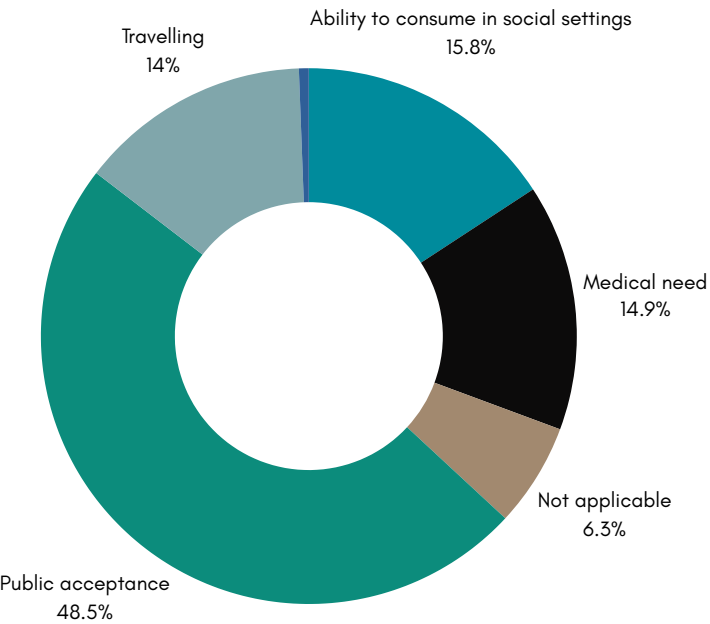
# Attitudes

Where would you consume your medical cannabis?



In response to the question about the preferred consumption location for medical cannabis, participants were allowed multiple choices. The majority indicated their homes as the primary place for consuming medical cannabis, with the option to use it at work if needed. Notably, respondents in the 18-45 age group were more inclined to select multiple options, showcasing a broader range of preferred consumption settings. In contrast, those in the 45+ age cohort predominantly opted for home and, if necessary, work. This suggests age-related variations in preferences, with younger participants expressing a desire for more diverse consumption locations compared to their older counterparts, who leaned towards more conventional settings.

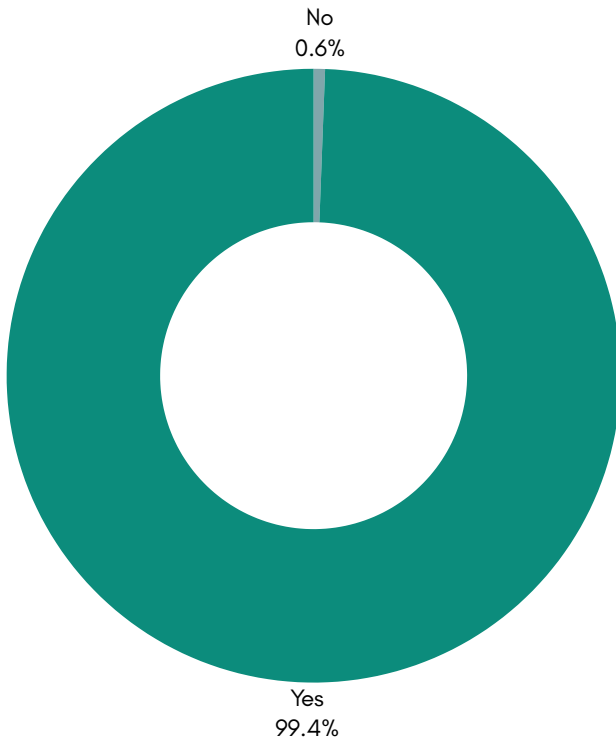
What would make you likely to take your medical cannabis outside of your home?



In response to the question of what factors would make individuals more likely to consume medical cannabis outside their homes, 48% emphasized the importance of public acceptance. This underscores the significant role social stigma and public perception play in the decision-making process regarding the use of medical cannabis. It's noteworthy that only 15% cited medical need as a determining factor. This highlights a distinctive aspect of medical cannabis, as few other medications face comparable levels of social stigma.

# Attitudes

Would you be supportive of others taking medical cannabis?



The overwhelming support, with 99% of respondents expressing a positive stance towards others using medical cannabis, underscores a broader societal acceptance that might be more substantial than what patients might anticipate. This finding contradicts potential concerns among patients about societal perceptions, indicating a high level of openness and understanding in the community regarding the use of medical cannabis. It suggests that, in reality, there is considerable support for individuals exploring alternative treatments for their health conditions. This level of acceptance is crucial in fostering an environment where patients feel understood and supported in their choices regarding medical cannabis.

Would you tell your Friends/Colleagues/Family if you were prescribed medical cannabis?



A resounding 92% of patients expressed their willingness to be open and honest about their medical cannabis use with family, friends, and colleagues. This not only reflects patients' transparency but also signifies their readiness to initiate conversations about medical cannabis. This proactive approach is instrumental in raising awareness and educating the general public about the merits and nuances of medical cannabis, fostering a more informed and supportive societal dialogue.

In exploring the landscape of medical cannabis attitudes and usage in Ireland, this survey has uncovered valuable insights into the perceptions and behaviours of respondents. The data indicates a significant interest in medical cannabis as a treatment option, with a staggering 96% expressing openness to consider it for their conditions. Despite this openness, barriers persist, as evidenced by the fact that only a minute fraction had been prescribed medical cannabis, and a noteworthy 11% sought a prescription but were refused.

A noteworthy concern emerges regarding awareness, with 48% of participants being unaware of the legal routes to access medical cannabis. This lack of awareness, particularly among those with conditions that may benefit from medical cannabis, signals a need for more comprehensive education and awareness campaigns.

The survey highlights the impact of conditions on individuals' lives, with 97% stating that their diagnosed condition affects various aspects, including work, family life, and personal life. Concerns about side effects from conventional treatments were prevalent, leading to a stark contrast with the willingness to explore medical cannabis, which 95% did not consider harmful.

The findings indicate a potential shift in societal attitudes, with 99% expressing support for others taking medical cannabis. However, there remains a concern about the perceived social stigma associated with medical cannabis, as indicated by respondents' considerations on where they would consume it.

In summary, this survey paints a comprehensive picture of the current landscape surrounding medical cannabis in Ireland. It illuminates the gaps in awareness, the existing barriers to access, and the overwhelming support for alternative treatments. These insights are crucial for informing policymakers, healthcare professionals, and the public as Ireland navigates its evolving stance on medical cannabis.



### **Disclaimer:**

This report provides a detailed overview of the primary findings and conclusions derived from the conducted survey on medical cannabis in Ireland. The insights presented here are based on the responses of the survey participants and are intended for informational purposes only. The findings should not be considered as professional advice, and readers are encouraged to consult with relevant healthcare professionals, legal authorities, and policymakers for personalised guidance and accurate information. The report serves as a snapshot of public opinions and attitudes, subject to change over time.