



Canada to widen its newly opened retail cannabis market

After opening its legal national marijuana marketplace, the country now has to make provisions for different types of products, including edibles. Paul Webster reports.



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3 months after it approved retail sales of dried cannabis for recreational smoking, the Canadian Government has launched public consultations on plans to regulate the retailing of cannabis in products such as extracts, lotions, food, and drinks. Marketing of these products—which the government estimates could ultimately comprise almost half of Canada’s total retail cannabis market—will begin later this year.

In an analysis released for public comment in late December, Health Canada explained that although dried cannabis for smoking is now available legally, there is currently no legal commercial source of edible cannabis, cannabis extracts, and cannabis topicals, with the exception of cannabis oil. Legalisation of these new classes of cannabis products will give adult Canadians “access to a legal, quality-controlled, and strictly regulated supply of such products” while curbing the illegal market, Health Canada said.

Although some of these products present a reduced health risk as alternatives to smoking cannabis, Health Canada added, some of them, including products with high concentrations of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), “represent a greater health risk”. A key element of the government’s proposals aims to limit THC levels in edible cannabis products while prohibiting “representations that associate a cannabis product, its packaging, or its labelling with an alcoholic beverage”. This is “to decrease the potential normalisation of alcohol and cannabis concurrent co-use, given that combining cannabis with alcohol increases impairment”, Health Canada explained.

Public education efforts will be “a critical component of mitigating the health risks” of the new cannabis categories, Health Canada emphasised.

The Canadian Government estimates that the total value of Canada’s cannabis

market might be as high as US\$7 billion annually, and tax revenues are now pouring into provincial and federal government coffers. Given this tantalising new revenue stream, Jürgen Rehm, senior director at the Institute for Mental Health Policy Research at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in

“... there is currently no legal commercial source of edible cannabis, cannabis extracts, and cannabis topicals, with the exception of cannabis oil.”

Toronto, ON, says he worries Canadian Governments could eventually adopt much the same approach to cannabis as they currently do with alcohol, which is almost entirely retailed and marketed by government-owned corporations that benefit from high-use rates associated with profound health harms.

Rehm, who advises Health Canada on its cannabis policies, says the new categories of edible and topical cannabis products pose regulatory challenges that are markedly different from dried cannabis for smoking. “With edible products, there is greater risk that the effects will be underestimated by consumers”, he warns. “We are at the first stage in regulating this, and we will have to make a number of experimental studies to see whether what is planned by Health Canada is appropriate.” Rehm added that he would like to see the Canadian Government devote far more of its newfound cannabis tax revenues to research into cannabis-related harms.

Mike DeVillaer, a faculty associate at the Centre for Medicinal Cannabis Research at McMaster University in Hamilton, ON, warns that the cannabis industry “will want to do what they can to expand the cannabis market by capturing new permanent users and by increasing use among current users.

As we know, the problem with that is that we can expect an increase in aggregate use to lead to an increase in aggregate public health harm”.

Worryingly, DeVillaer adds, despite existing laws prohibiting cannabis promotion, “the cannabis industry has been boldly gaming and outright violating these provisions with nothing in the way of punitive consequences from Health Canada. I think there are some sensible provisions in the edibles and concentrates regulations, but I’m concerned that Health Canada will be equally timid in their enforcement.”

Mark Ware, Medical Director for Canopy Growth Inc., says the proposed regulations are “much anticipated and most welcome”.

In Ottawa, Ian Culbert, executive director of the Canadian Public Health Association, says he is pleased with the government’s new regulatory proposals. “Ideally, we would like to see gummy bears not containing THC”, he says, “but that’s not going to happen. I can already hear the manufacturers saying ‘you are forcing us to market these products in unappealing ways, and we are saying, yes, that is right’.”

Like Rehm, Culbert warns that there is a lack of fundamental understanding of the brain impacts of edible cannabis products. And, although he welcomes Health Canada’s statement on the need for greater health promotion efforts to educate the public on cannabis-related risks, he warns that so far, Canada’s federal and provincial governments are not doing enough. “Now is the time to do it”, Culbert says.

Health Canada was unable to respond to written questions concerning its cannabis health promotion and cannabis health research budgets before this article went to press.

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