

Cannabis retailer communication about cannabis products, health benefits and risks: A mystery shopper study of licensed retailers in 5 US cities

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Objective:

As the US cannabis market expands, surveillance of retailer practices, especially product health claims and risks, is crucial to protect consumers. In this study, mystery shoppers (i.e., staff not explicitly identified as researchers) examined retail personnel communication regarding product recommendations, health benefits, safety, and/or risks among US cannabis retailers.

Methods:

In Summer 2022, mystery shoppers audited 140 licensed cannabis retailers in 5 cities in states with established non-medical (i.e., recreational) cannabis sales and diverse regulations (Denver, Colorado; Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; Las Vegas, Nevada; Los Angeles, California). Descriptive and bivariate analyses characterized retail personnel communication overall and across cities.

Results:

Common product recommendations for new users included edibles, pre-rolled joints, and bud/flower, and 8.6% offered free/inexpensive ways to sample products. Although Colorado, Washington, and Oregon explicitly prohibited health claims in advertising or labels, >93% of retailers overall endorsed use for anxiety, insomnia, and/or pain. While 54.3% endorsed use for pregnancy-related nausea (least common in Denver, 23.3%; most common in Seattle, 76.7%), 26.4% warned against use during pregnancy (most frequently in Denver, 46.7%; least frequently in Seattle and Portland, 13.3%, respectively). Overall, 52.1% warned against driving after use (most frequently in Denver, 80.0%; least frequently in Las Vegas, 20.0%). Almost all (≥90%) sold CBD products and endorsed their health benefits and safety, but few (<10%) sold or endorsed delta-8 THC, etc. (all of which were in LA).

Conclusions:

Ongoing cannabis retail surveillance, particularly using protocols assessing factors outside those visibly observable, is needed to inform regulatory and enforcement efforts, especially related to health claims.