

A photograph of Cory Parsons, a man with glasses and a beard, looking thoughtfully at a field of cannabis plants. The lighting is warm and focused on him, with the plants in the background slightly blurred.

Cultivating with Cory

Chef, author and organic gardener Cory Parsons shares his knowledge of the pain-relieving properties of cannabis, choosing the right strains and dosages, the importance of organic growing, and the best ways of taking your daily medicine.

Cory Parsons is a name familiar to most of us.

He's the author of the popular *Cooking with Cory* cookbook, and we've published several stories about him in the past few years—he provided his best kitchen techniques for other cooks who are quadriplegic, and he's allowed us to showcase his superb accessibility renovations in his Nanaimo home.

More recently, Parsons was one of several SCI BC Peers we recruited to speak candidly about their experiences about using cannabis as a viable treatment for SCI-related neuropathic pain (our feature, titled "Good Medicine", ran in the Summer 2013 issue of *The Spin*). Since then, Parsons has delved even deeper into the pain-controlling properties of cannabis. As a long-time legal grower of cannabis for his own medical purposes, he's been in the unique position of being able to experiment with strains that work best to relieve pain, dosages that relieve pain without rendering a person so high that they can't function in a 9-to-5 world, alternative methods of treatment such as edibles, and how to grow organically without the use of potentially harmful chemicals and fertilizers.

For this issue, we asked Parsons to let us pick his brain. In the true spirit of peer support, he generously agreed to share his hard-won knowledge. Because we know that many SCI BC Peers also rely on cannabis as a pain reliever (or are interested in trying it), we welcome Parson's point of view, and encourage more research to better understand pot's analgesic abilities and how they can best be maximized.

Can you describe your particular brand of neuropathic pain, and the steps you've taken over the years to tame it?

My injury occurred in 1998 as a result of a diving accident in shallow water. I broke my neck at C5-C6, rendering me quadriplegic with sensory sparing below my injury without motor control. My new normal included often severe neuropathic pain that can best be described as a burning sensation.

Initially, doctors attempted to treat my pain with prescription drugs such as gabapentin, antidepressants, and even opioids. None of these brought any type of significant benefit that would offset their many negative side-effects.

Then I discovered a psychotherapy called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, or EMDR, which was originally developed for people with PTSD. And I also began using medical cannabis. These two treatments have allowed me to manage my pain on a long-term basis, without using prescription meds.

How did you discover that cannabis could help control your pain?

I'd used cannabis for many years prior to my injury. I knew its effects and its ability to help deal with discomfort, insomnia, anxiousness, and even sadness or depression. So it was a

natural consideration for me to try using it to combat my pain and discomfort following my injury. Within a few months of being discharged from rehab, I was regularly using cannabis to treat my pain and insomnia, and help me relax during my transition back to home and my new life.

What's your understanding in terms of the mechanism that allows cannabis to control neuropathic pain?

There is mounting scientific evidence confirming the positive effects of medical cannabis and its ability to help treat pain—and a host of other ailments. Evidence is even starting to emerge about its potential to be a treatment and a cure for some types of cancer.

I'm no scientist, but my understanding of its function as a pain relieving agent is that, once introduced into our bodies, cannabinoids act as a kind of synaptic circuit breaker—they reduce the abnormal neuron activity that's behind neuropathic pain. They do this by binding to the cannabinoid receptors that are an important part of our nervous systems. Once in place, they block the release of neurotransmitters that have been found to trigger pain. There's lots of great information online for anyone interested more in the science of cannabis pain relief.

What should people trying cannabis for SCI pain for the first time realistically expect?

As with any treatment, every individual is going to feel differently and have different levels of sensitivity and tolerance. I am increasingly surprised at the variety of ways that different strains of cannabis affect people differently.

For someone using cannabis for the first time, a good outcome would be one that meets their reasons for introducing cannabis into their treatment. If someone is seeking relief of insomnia, then a good result would be a restful night's sleep. Others seeking to improve their appetite and energy may get those benefits as well. The key to good outcomes, I believe, is arming yourself with good information, sourcing a quality product that promises to meet your specific needs, and doing

some informed trial and error experimentation until the best results are achieved.

What are the negatives or downsides of using cannabis for pain relief? In your mind, are there any safety concerns?

It's really dependent on the dosage and frequency used. As with most things in life, excess can lead to uncomfortable outcomes, and high doses of cannabis can lead to nausea, anxiety, and an overall sense of discomfort. But it's really important to note that there has never been a single death associated with medical cannabis use. That's not to say that you shouldn't take a cautious approach when combining with prescription medications or other drugs such as alcohol.

What are the most important things you've learned along the way, in terms of the best strains for medical use?

When it comes to sourcing the best strains, several factors should be considered, including the effects desired.

There are two important active ingredients—THC, which is short for tetrahydrocannabinol, and CBD, or cannabidiol. Indica dominant strains have more THC, while sativa strains have more CBD. Many modern strains are known as hybrids, as they have both THC and CBD.

Sativa strains provide a more elevated or uplifting result, and may improve appetite, energy, creativity, and pain relief. Indica strains are generally more effective at enhancing relaxation, treating insomnia and suppressing anxiety, although they can also improve appetite and provide pain relief. Many hybrids are available that have been designed specifically to incorporate the best from both of these plant qualities, and the choices have become nearly endless.

If you're growing yourself, other factors to consider are your available space (sativa strains are generally much taller), resistance to pests and moulds, and the period of time necessary for proper maturation and overall yield quality.

My personal preference is hybrids with roughly 70 percent sativa and 30 percent indica. I find this combination

to be uplifting, somewhat energy boosting, and pain suppressing—it gives me an enjoyable, creative, cerebral stimulation that allows for extended hours of gardening and cooking.

What about the best methods of treatment?

Traditionally, cannabis has been smoked. Aside from the potential health hazards of ingesting any burnt substance, cannabis has been shown to be far more medicinally effective when ingested by alternative methods such as vaporizing and eating, once it's been transformed into an absorbable form such as oil or butter that can be used in almost any recipe. Brownies and cookies are the most popular edible. When consumed orally, CBD and THC are absorbed into the body with greater anti-inflammatory and disease-fighting properties, and a much higher medicinal effect for treating pain.

How do you arrive at the optimum dosage?

I believe this may be the most important factor in a successful treatment regime—one that gives you relief while ensuring the least amount of negative side effects. Anyone who has ever overindulged can tell you with conviction that a "green out" is a most undesirable experience.

My advice? Start cautiously—it's easy to add a little more, but impossible to take it away once you've eaten too much. Starting with what might seem like ridiculously small amounts and slowly increasing the dosage according to one's comfort and the medicinal effects desired is my recipe for a healthy and happy relationship with medicinal cannabis. When used like this, you'll have a near absence of feeling high or losing cognitive function—your awareness of the cannabis in your system will largely be restricted to a reduction in pain or improvement in the symptoms you're attempting to treat.

Speaking of getting too high, a recent research study suggests that, when it comes to pain relief, too much can be ineffective. Is this your experience?

Again, I can't stress enough the importance of a minimal starting dosage with

adequate absorption periods of time between additional doses (about 90 to 120 minutes), as overexposure can result in an uncomfortable sensation. Speaking for myself, when treating my neuropathic pain, I find the greatest benefit comes from very minimal doses that help “switch off” my focus on my pain, as opposed to heavier or larger doses which tend to cause me to fixate on the pain. I have even felt that higher doses exacerbated my body’s sensation of pain.

What are the biggest misconceptions about cannabis and pain relief?

Many people believe it has to be smoked to be effective, or that they need to be completely stoned to experience the medicinal benefits. Nothing could be further from the truth! Once again, for most people, implementing a micro dose or low dose of medicinal cannabis has been incredibly effective in alleviating pain, with very little noticeable cerebral or “high” or “stoned” sensations. I’ve personally witnessed people living in excruciating and unbearable pain treated with a very low oral dose of medicinal cannabis and then returning to a normal daily routine, living a happy and healthy lifestyle.

A great example of this is the well-documented story of Charlotte, a young girl who was living with extreme epileptic seizures. A hybrid plant was bred to alleviate her seizures without impairing her ability to function as any child should. Another excellent success story I’ve personally witnessed is that of an 85-year-old man who has successfully treated his neuropathic pain from spinal stenosis, without getting high—something he was very concerned about.

When did you apply for your medical license? Why did you want to grow yourself?

Originally, I requested a prescription from my doctor in order to possess cannabis legally. He told me about the option to have someone grow it for me or, if I was capable, to legally grow it myself. Since I’d grown it outdoors prior to my injury, I decided to try it. Of course, hiking into



the mountains to grow wasn’t an option anymore, but once I got my legal status, I began growing in my own backyard.

As a grower, can you describe the learning curve that you’ve gone through?

In the beginning, I was frustrated with many common obstacles that anyone faces when they attempt to confine mother nature to a small space—pests, moulds (entirely due to poor airflow), and, of course, the obvious smell.

Twenty years ago, good information on growing properly, safely, and effectively was only available by word-of-mouth from extremely tight-lipped older generation growers who held on to their secrets as tightly as the Illuminati! You truly had to know someone in the industry in order to get accurate information, and your only other option was to go to a hydroponic

gardening store and request information on how to grow your “tomatoes”.

Obviously, the Internet has opened the doors completely, and the information shared freely online is excellent. This is due in large part to more relaxed laws and the opportunity to now legally grow medical cannabis for personal use. I’ve taken good advantage of these resources, and through better technique, proper testing and examination, I’ve had great success in the past few years growing some of the most effective medicinal cannabis I’ve ever experienced.

I guess I’ve become one of the older generation—I’ve been affectionately named the Quadfather by some of my friends—but the difference is that I take great pleasure in sharing my expertise to those wishing to embark on their own organic gardening adventures.

Speaking of organics, you're a staunch advocate of organic growing. How did you come to believe so passionately in it?

What I've found to be the true benefit of growing organically is a measurable and obvious difference in quality, regardless of what's being grown—tomatoes, fennel, corn, or medicinal cannabis. Organic growing is also much more sustainable, and results in a higher nutrient value. Think about the difference between the tomatoes we buy in the winter, and the tomatoes that we either grow organically ourselves or purchase from an organic grower in the summer months.

I can't advocate strongly enough for medicinal cannabis to be grown organically and ethically if it's to be truly considered a medicine. Large corporations are producing medical cannabis on an enormous scale without consideration of the benefits of organic growing, and I believe this is a tremendous mistake. Anything less than an organic product could potentially increase or influence health conditions negatively, instead of treating or curing them.

Organic farming is very simple in that only certified organic nutrients can be used, and no harmful chemicals are permitted throughout the farming process. As for cost, purchasing organically certified nutrients for your farming needs can be slightly more expensive, but this can be offset with composting, worm castings, and incorporating natural ingredients such as seaweed and manure.

Recently, medical self-growers won an important legal battle. Can you describe that victory and why it was so important?

In 2014, the former Conservative government introduced a law that would prevent patients from growing cannabis for their personal medical use. Four brave British Columbians challenged the regulations in Federal Court, and in February of this year, a judge sided with them and struck the regulations down.

This is an incredible victory as it alleviates the concern of growing illegally in order to have access to an affordable, high-quality, chemical-free and organic

source of medicinal cannabis. Many of the commercial production licensed facilities are growing vast amounts of cannabis that is low-grade, low-quality and, in my opinion, should not be considered medicinal due to toxic growing practices and unethical treatment of this amazing plant. And, if that isn't enough, they're charging nearly double the price that people have considered as being fair.

How do you see mainstream legalization unfolding in Canada?

It's been the hope of many Canadians that our new Prime Minister would remain true to his word and push forward with legalization. This is certainly easier said than done and I for one do not personally see it actually unfolding as envisioned.

It's been proven in Colorado and other states that legalization can provide an incredible economic boost and make the availability of medical cannabis much more widespread. But bureaucracy and government roadblocks will no doubt slow this process in Canada.

In my opinion, the importance should be placed upon decriminalization instead of legalization, as people jailed for possession of minor amounts of cannabis should not be in prison with murderers, rapists and other violent criminals.

My greatest fear is that, since this industry has proven to be a viable source of revenue, our government will attempt to appoint itself as the sole legal provider—and all self-growers who continue to operate will have to do so illegally.

To sum up, why should other people dealing with SCI pain consider using cannabis?

Up to this point, neuropathic pain from SCI and other sources has largely been treated with cocktails of prescription meds with few positive outcomes, and many negative side effects. Meanwhile, cannabis has increasingly been shown to have positive effects when treating pain associated with SCI—and also insomnia, anxiety, poor appetite, and spasticity. With the proper dosing regimen using medically-appropriate strains, there are

no known negative side effects reported in adults—only effective outcomes.

Why should people consider growing themselves? Is the effort worth it?

It's a personal issue for every individual—it depends on your financial situation, the quantity of medicine you need on a daily basis, and your willingness to learn a skill that's not without its challenges. But those of us who have made the investment have experienced cost savings, tremendous satisfaction, and peace of mind that comes from knowing exactly what's contained in our medicine.

As a long-time organic grower of everything in my own garden including medicinal cannabis, I encourage everyone to grow organically. It's extremely rewarding and offers the security and comfort of knowing the source of your medicine and food is grown responsibly in a way that ensures quality and avoids chemicals and pesticides. As with anything worth doing in life, it comes with some trials and tribulations, but the rewards are clear and obvious.

With the incredible amount of information available online and, of course, from some of us "old timers," it's now easier than ever to learn all the necessary techniques. Other good information resources include hydroponic growing stores, and medical dispensaries.

Are you personally willing to share your knowledge with any SCI BC peers?

I've lived for two decades with an SCI, and I've learned a great deal about how to manage SCI pain and other complications. Over the years, I've made it one of my missions to share my knowledge, including my expertise in organic farming of all kinds. As a published cookbook author, I'm also able to offer excellent recipes and cooking tips that enhance independence and allow medical cannabis to be introduced into our daily diets. If anyone wants to connect with me about living with an SCI, cooking tips and interest in my cookbook, or organic growing, please feel free to contact me at cookingwithcory@shaw.ca. ■