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Natural Product Use among Veterans with Chronic Pain: A Qualitative Study of Attitudes and Communication with Healthcare Providers



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Our Study



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- **Subjects:** veterans experiencing chronic pain who use natural products (NPs) for pain or related health concerns
 - We examined how veterans decide which products to take, how they access NPs, and barriers to use.
 - We also explored veterans' beliefs about the safety and efficacy of NPs, and their experiences discussing these products with healthcare providers.
 - **Objective:** Improve awareness of how veterans use and think about NPs and the importance of patient-provider conversations surrounding NPs

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Methods



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- Qualitative sub-study of pragmatic randomized control trial (wHOPE)
 - 20/52 veterans who completed the NP survey were recruited for qualitative interviews
 - Purposive sampling
 - Original semi-structured interview guide
 - Open-ended probes
 - Interviews conducted by phone
 - 20-60 minutes (mean length 28 minutes)
 - Rapid analysis

wHOPE

WHOLE HEALTH OPTIONS AND PAIN EDUCATION



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Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Total N=20
	n (%)
Age	
≤ age 49	7 (35)
≥ age 50	13 (65)
Gender	
Male	10 (50)
Female	10 (50)
Non-Binary/Third gender	0 (0)
Prefer to self-describe	0 (0)

Race	
White	14 (70)
Black or African American	5 (25)
Asian	2 (10)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0 (0)
American Indian or Alaska Native	0 (0)
More than One Race	1 (5)
Ethnicity	
Hispanic or Latino	2 (10)
Not Hispanic or Latino	18 (90)

Educational Status	
Some high school	0 (0)
High school graduate/GED	1 (5)
Some college	8 (40)
<u>Associates</u> degree	5 (25)
College Graduate, <u>Bachelor's</u> degree	4 (20)
Master's Level Degree	2 (10)
Doctoral Degree	0 (0)
Income	
No income	0 (0)
Under \$10,00	0 (0)
\$10,000 - \$25,000	1 (5)
\$25,001 - \$50,000	5 (25)
\$50,001 - \$75,000	6 (30)
\$75,001 - \$100,000	4 (20)
More than \$100,000	1 (5)
Prefer not to say	3 (15)

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Results: Learning about Natural Products



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- Veterans learned about NPs through their own research.
 - Decisions about NPs were sometimes made in collaboration with healthcare providers.
 - It was sometimes difficult to find detailed information about NPs.
 - *“You go to the store, and you see several natural products, and it has a vague description on them, so you don't really know what's what unless you do an internet search. And so, I see something that says, ‘improves circulation,’ and I'm thinking, okay, that'd be great, but it might not bode well with my existing medication.”*

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Accessing Natural Products



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- Veterans reported obtaining NPs online, through the VA, or from chain stores.
 - Veterans found it was easier to access NPs than pharmaceutical products.
 - Cost and availability could be barriers to access.
 - *"I don't have to see a doctor to go get a natural product if I'm having an issue. Whereas, if I'm going to seek the other [pharmaceutical] products, I have to schedule an appointment, see the doctor, have them prescribe it."*
 - *"I've got kids, I'm paying for a house, and my disability is my income, so we budget tight. And, as such, I can't afford an extra \$50-75 bucks a month to get all the supplements that I know would help me."*

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Perceived Safety of Natural Products



- Veterans perceived NPs as safe to use.
- Veterans perceived NPs as having fewer and less serious side effects and drug interactions.
- Perception of safety depends on the patient, the product, and what the product is for.
- *“They're pretty much nature grown, and they usually test these things out before they put them on the shelves. This country has a pretty good record as far as making sure things are good and there's nothing in it that's bad.”*
- **Concern:** *[salespeople are] “not qualified doctors. They’re just talking based on the product description and trying to sell you the products, so they don't know your medical history, they don't know what meds you're taking, they don't even ask!”*

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Perceived Efficacy of Natural Products



- NPs were perceived as effective for pain and general health concerns.
- Veterans used NPs to reduce their use of pharmaceutical products for pain or to replace them entirely.
- Veterans felt that the efficacy of NPs depends on the type of pain, the product, and duration of use.
- *After taking a turmeric supplement: “I still take ibuprofen or something like that for breakthrough pain, but I went from taking 6-9 pills a day... down to just maybe 2 or 3.”*
- *“Some people want instant gratification; they want their meds to work right now, whereas the natural stuff might take a while for it to get into your system and move around and get that particular area of concern.”*

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Discussing Natural Products with Providers



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- Veterans felt that providers should discuss NPs with their patients.
 - Veterans wanted advice from providers regarding dosage, brands, interactions, and side effects.
 - Conversations with providers about NPs were brief and lacked depth.
 - *“I didn’t even think to talk to them about it. So, I think it’s kind of not necessarily a failure, but maybe a lack of education for all of us across the board.”*
 - *“...the best way to handle a patient is to be completely open and honest with them and give them all their options and let them decide for themselves which route they choose to go.”*

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Discussing NPs with Providers, cont.



- Veterans felt providers demonstrated biases towards pharmaceuticals.
- Discussions were sometimes perceived to be impacted by racial or gender biases.
- Conversations were productive and positive when providers were open-minded, validated experiences, and connected veterans to helpful resources.
- *"...as a woman, and as a Black woman... unless I had a Black doctor, they didn't always listen to me. They didn't believe me, and... it makes you not want to go see them because [they're] not listening anyway."*
- *"I've become an advocate for myself, and if I'm not comfortable with taking something, I will advocate [for] that with my doctor. I have stopped seeing doctors because we have a difference of opinion, because... I don't feel that you can progress further with treatment if [the doctor] and the patient don't come to some sort of agreement on the treatment."*

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Discussion



Challenges

- Healthcare providers rarely have training or expertise in NPs.
- Providers may have legitimate concerns that make them hesitant to recommend NPs to patients.
- Patients may not have accurate information regarding NPs.

Considerations

- **Providers:** Introduce veterans to safe and reliable information sources
- **Health systems:** Offer referrals to providers or pharmacists with expertise in NPs
- **Providers:** Approach conversations with open-mindedness, be transparent about knowledge limitations, use a patient-centered approach

Limitations & Future Directions



Limitations

- Not a representative sample
- Did not differentiate between types of NPs
- Confusion between NPs and other substances or CIH modalities

Future Directions

- Examine experiences of subgroups of veterans & non-veterans
- Explore the use of non-judgmental communication techniques
- Study the perspective of healthcare providers

Thank you!

Questions?