

One in ten medicinal cannabis users now have a prescription, but many still afraid to ask

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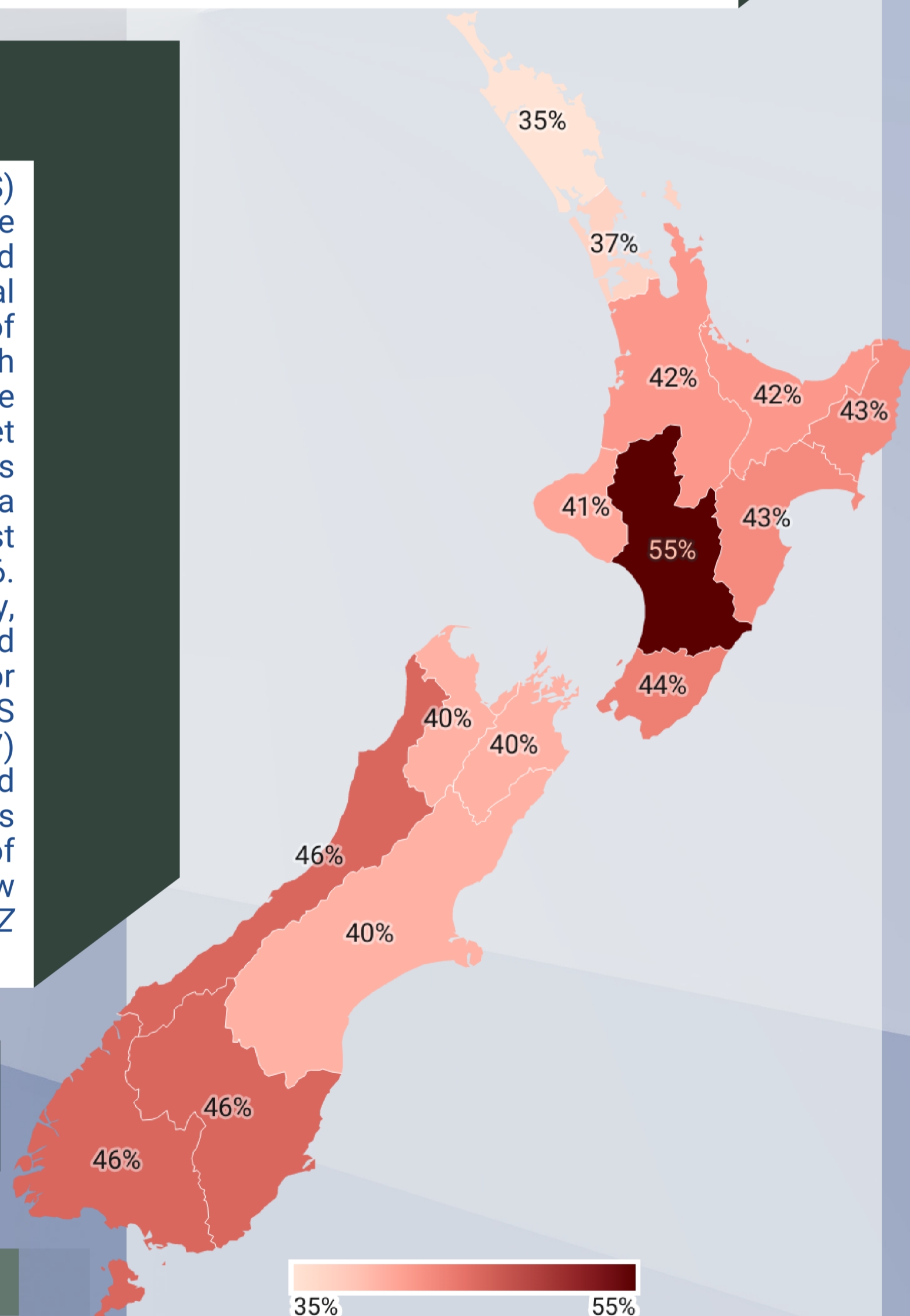
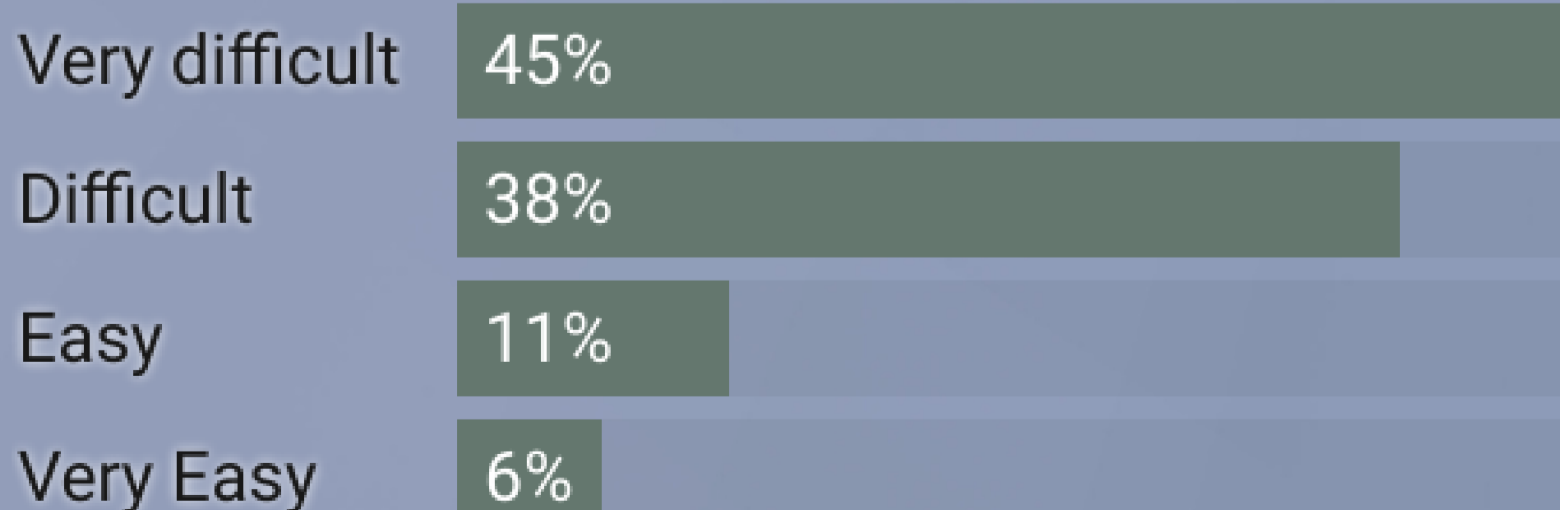
Key findings

- Three years into the implementation of the Medicinal Cannabis Scheme, 1 in 10 medicinal cannabis users report they have a prescription for a cannabis product
- The proportion of medicinal cannabis users who asked their doctor for a prescription increased from 2020 to 2023 from a low baseline
- Nearly half of medicinal cannabis users report it is “very difficult” to obtain legal medicinal cannabis products
- The regions where medicinal cannabis is reportedly easiest to obtain are Auckland and Northland

Methods

Participants in the New Zealand Drug Trends Survey (NZDTS) answered questions about their use of cannabis, including the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes. Those who answered that they used “all” or “most” of their cannabis for medical reasons were included in this bulletin (approximately 23% of respondents who used cannabis in the past 6 months). Each round of the NZDTS is an anonymous online convenience survey designed to provide an annual snapshot of drug market and cannabis use in Aotearoa New Zealand. The NZDTS was promoted via a targeted Facebook advertising campaign over a period of several months. The 2022/23 survey ran from August 2022 to February 2023 and achieved a final sample of 13,026. While the NZDTS is not intended to be a representative survey, the sample broadly represents the demographic profile and regional population distribution of NZ (see Bulletin 6 for details). However, related to the aims of the survey, the NZDTS sample reports much higher levels of drug use (see Bulletin 7) and is younger than the general population. More detailed research on the implementation of NZ's Medicinal Cannabis Scheme can be found in Rychert, et al. (2021) “Predictors of medicinal cannabis users' willingness to utilise a new prescription medicinal cannabis scheme in New Zealand.” *NZ Medical Journal*, 134 (1534), 66-75.

Medicinal cannabis users' perceptions of the availability of legal medicinal cannabis products, 2022-23 (n=1,833)

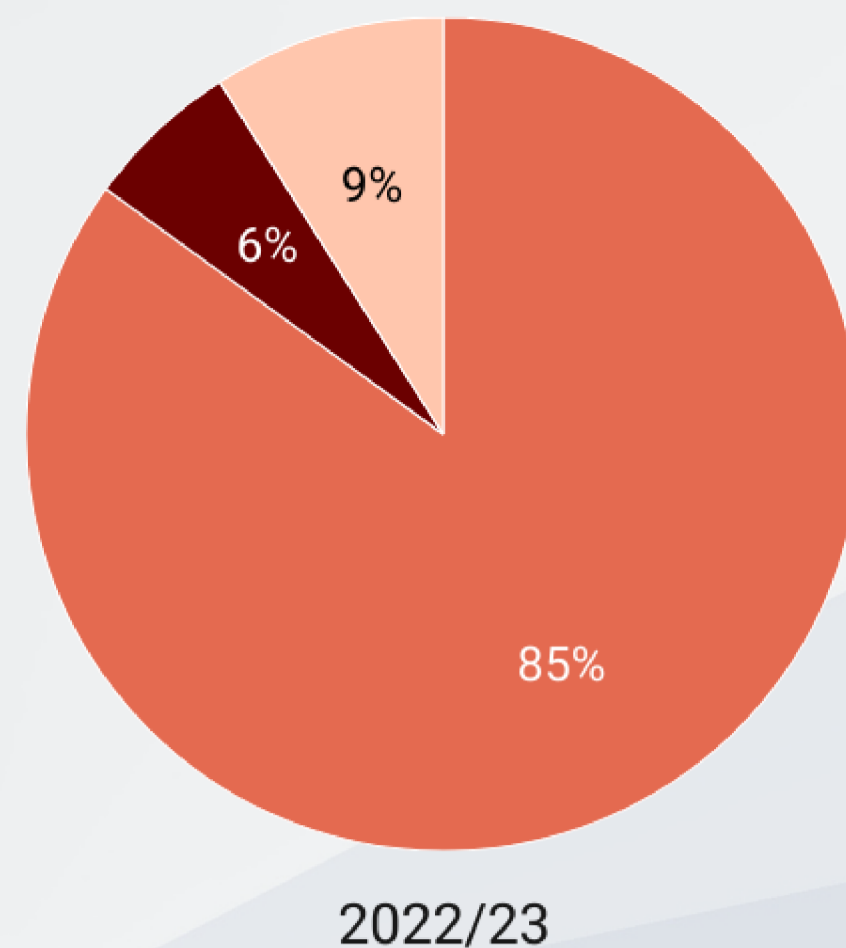
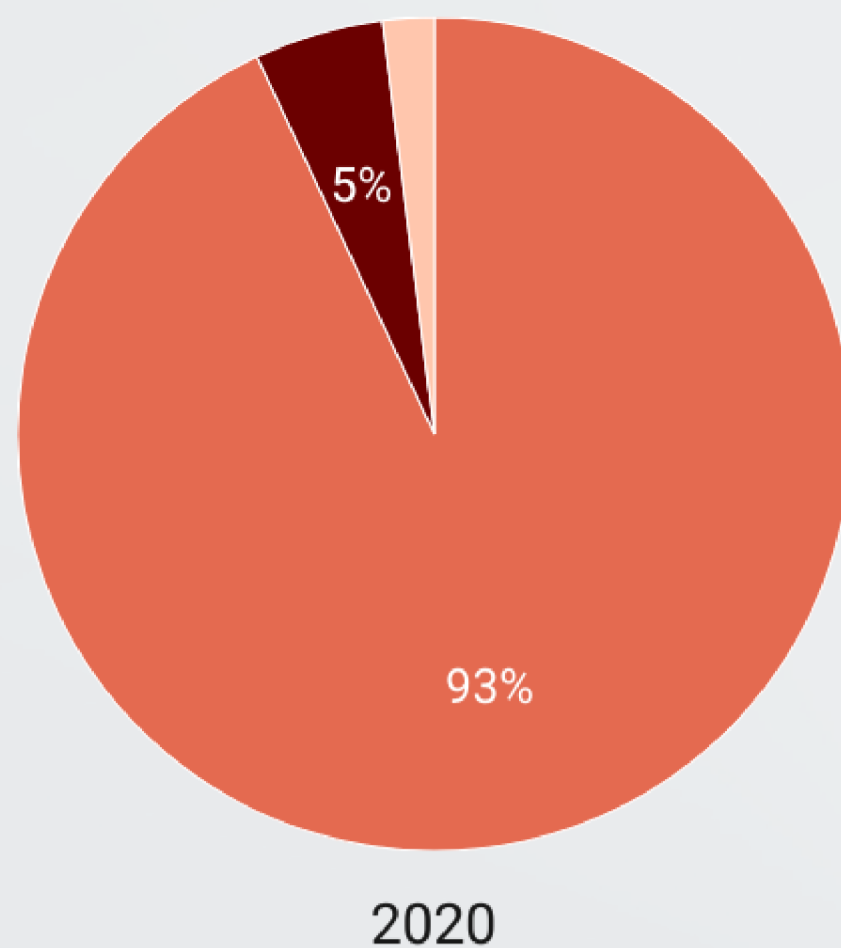


% respondents reporting legal medicinal cannabis products as "very difficult" to obtain by region, 2022-23

Note on map data: Regional availability data is based on answers from respondents who indicated that "all", "most", "some" or "a little" of their cannabis use was for medicinal purposes.

- No - have not asked
- No - asked but refused
- Yes - I have a prescription

Reported extent of asking for a prescription for cannabis among NZDTS medicinal cannabis users, 2020-23



Reasons for *not* asking for a prescription reported by NZDTS medicinal cannabis users, 2022-23 (n=1,613)

Don't think my doctor would prescribe

56%

Happy with current supply (e.g., green fairy/black market)

50%

Too expensive

50%

Too embarrassed/negative stigma

44%

Range of products too limited

25%

Prefer to grow my own

14%

Don't think industry should profit from cannabis

14%

Mental health (e.g., depression, PTSD, ADHD)

76%

Sleep

73%

Pain relief

65%

Gastro-intestinal

16%

Drug dependency/withdrawal

11%

Other

11%

Neurological (e.g., epilepsy, MS)

5%

Cancer

2%

Conditions and symptoms treated using medicinal cannabis among NZDTS respondents, 2022-23 (n=1,922)

Discussion

The Medicinal Cannabis Scheme has been in operation in New Zealand since April 2020, with 30 products now approved for sale through pharmacies. The proportion of medicinal cannabis users in the NZDTS who received a prescription for medicinal cannabis increased from 2% to 9% over 3 years. This increase from a low baseline may reflect increasing GP familiarity with the scheme, a wider range of products, and the opening of private cannabis clinics. This trend is consistent with official data on the number of medicinal cannabis products dispensed in New Zealand, with over a three-fold increase in dispensed products from Q1 of 2021 to Q1 of 2023, when over 26,000 products were supplied. Medicinal cannabis users continue to report barriers to accessing prescribed medicinal cannabis, including perceptions of stigma, high cost, and continuing supply from alternative black and grey market sources. The reported conditions for which medicinal cannabis is being accessed are consistent with international trends, for example mental health (e.g. anxiety), sleep and pain. High proportions of survey participants (75%) reported a medical diagnosis for the conditions they use cannabis for. Despite positive signs of medicinal cannabis users increasingly accessing prescriptions, geographical inequities in access remain, perhaps reflecting regional GPs' reluctance to discuss cannabis as a treatment option due to fears of reputational damage, and lower numbers of specialised cannabis clinics. Prior research also found that transitioning to the legal medicinal cannabis scheme may be harder for medicinal cannabis users on lower incomes and Māori, indicating a need to address inequities in the scheme.