

# Changes in clinical features and severity in patients presenting to European emergency departments with acute cannabis toxicity over the 10-year period from 2013 to 2022

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## Abstract

**Background and aims:** In recent years, the potency of natural cannabis products (herb and resin) has increased with a higher delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol ( $\Delta^9$ -THC) content, but there are limited data on trends on clinical presentation and severity of toxicity in cannabis users consulting the emergency department (ED) for acute intoxication. This study aimed to analyse the evolution over time of clinical findings and severity of presentations in a large series of patients presenting to European EDs with acute toxicity after lone cannabis use.

**Design:** Secondary analysis of data included in the Euro-DEN Registry from 1 October 2013 to 31 December 2022.

**Setting:** 40 EDs in 25 European countries.

**Participants/cases:** ED presentations reporting lone cannabis use. Presentations reporting concomitant use of, or having positive toxicological tests for, ethanol or other drugs were excluded. 3839 ED presentations reporting lone cannabis use were analysed (median age 25 years, interquartile range= 20–33; 71% male).

**Measurements:** Temporal trends of 14 pre-defined clinical signs/symptoms and 4 markers of severity, which included the need for ambulance transfer to the ED, hospitalisation, intensive care unit admission (ICU) and death.

**Findings:** The most frequent clinical features were anxiety (35%), agitation (22%), decreased alertness (drowsiness or coma, 21%) and vomiting (20%), while seizures, arrhythmias and hyperthermia were observed in <3% of cases. Statistically significant changes over time were only found in the frequency of hypotension [adjusted odds ratio (OR) = 1.239 per every subsequent year, 95% confidence interval (CI) = 1.107–1.386], hypertensive crisis (OR = 1.168, 95% CI = 1.070–1.274) and palpitations (OR = 0.922, 95% CI = 0.883–0.962). Nonlinear analyses detected statistically significant mid-period increases for anxiety, agitation and arrhythmias that subsided by the end of the study, and showed increases in chest pain and decreases in seizures that became statistically significant in the latter half of the period. Regarding episode severity, 76% of cases were

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brought to the ED by ambulance, 13% required hospitalisation, 1% were admitted to the ICU and 0.1% died. No statistically significant changes were observed over time in either the linear or the nonlinear models.

**Conclusion:** Very few changes in the clinical features of patients presenting to European emergency departments with lone acute cannabis toxicity were identified over 2013 to 2022, suggesting that despite the increase in potency of cannabis in Europe over this period, the severity of acute intoxication has remained unchanged.

### KEYWORDS

cannabis, emergency department, hashish, marihuana, severity, temporal trends

## INTRODUCTION

The potency of natural cannabis products (herbal and resin) has increased in recent years in the USA and Europe [1, 2]. The  $\Delta 9$ -tetrahydrocannabinol ( $\Delta 9$ -THC)/cannabidiol (CBD) ratios found in both herbal and resin samples has confirmed a change in the chemotypes present, in favour of higher potency categories [3]. With this increasing potency of natural cannabis products, there has been concern about the public health impact of cannabis use and the potential increased risk of acute adverse events in cannabis users [4, 5].

Regarding the long-term consequences of cannabis use, a recent systematic review showed that use of higher potency cannabis was associated with an increased risk of psychosis and cannabis use disorder, whilst evidence varied for depression and anxiety [6]. On the other hand, a number of adverse events can develop following acute cannabis consumption, which mainly include neuropsychological symptoms, such as anxiety, ataxia, distrust, fear, hallucinations, psychotic symptoms, stupor, suicidal ideation/tendency or unease, and seizures associated with cannabinoid hyperemesis syndrome (CHS) [7, 8]. Moreover, adverse cardiovascular effects such as palpitations, chest pain, syncope and symptomatic changes in blood pressure have also been described [9, 10]. Currently, there is limited published data, with no large series from either the USA or Europe, on whether changes in adverse events or case severity have been observed in recent years following acute cannabis use. Users experiencing the most severe acute adverse events require urgent care and they will typically present to emergency departments (EDs) [10–13]. Therefore, analysis of these patients may provide data relevant to this issue. The aim of this study was to use the European Drugs Emergencies Network (Euro-DEN) Plus data set to describe the changes in clinical features in a large series of patients presenting to European EDs with acute recreational drug toxicity associated with the lone use of cannabis, and investigate the severity of these presentations over the 10-year period from 2013 to 2022. Although this design does not allow changes in clinical presentation and severity of acute cannabis-related ED visits to be

directly attributed to the increase in the potency of cannabis products, it could highlight the real emerging hazards of cannabis consumption to drug users.

## METHODS

### Euro-DEN plus registry

The Euro-DEN Network was created in 2013 and was funded by a grant from the European Commission (JUST/2012/DPIP/AG/3591) during the period of 2013–2015. It initially comprised 16 sentinel centres in 10 European countries. Since 2014 the network has expanded to form the Euro-DEN Plus project, and by the end of 2024 it comprised 40 centres in 25 European countries. Data are collected on all presentations with acute recreational/illicit drug toxicity to each sentinel ED using a purposively designed minimum data set. Case adjudication is made by the principal investigator of each centre, with no external or central review of the diagnosis. Detailed information on the inclusion/exclusion criteria, data collection methodology, definition of collected signs and symptoms and ethical/Institutional Review Board approval processes have been described elsewhere [14–16].

### Study design

This is an exploratory analysis of data contained in the Euro-DEN Plus registry and the statistical plan was not registered in advance. We retrospectively identified Euro-DEN presentations that involved the use of cannabis (herb, resin or both) from 1 October 2013 to 31 December 2022. The use of cannabis was based on at least one the following criteria: (i) the patient and/or accompanying person reporting any form of cannabis use associated with the presentation; and/or (ii) the attending physician recording that the presentation was consistent with cannabis use; and/or (iii) cannabis metabolites were confirmed in toxicology analyses (routine toxicological analysis is not undertaken in

all Euro-DEN centres). As the registry is non-interventional and records clinical practice, not all patients included in the study underwent analytical tests to confirm the statement from the patient/accompanying person or the physician suspicion about the kind of drug(s) consumed. Double case detection was used, with the checking of medical charts and a review of the list of positive toxicological tests in each centre. After identifying a patient by medical report, we looked for any laboratory determination, and vice versa; when a positive test in the laboratory analysis was detected, the medical report was consulted to identify the substances used. As changes in clinical presentation and severity over time associated with cannabis use were of interest, patients in whom cannabis was the only drug used (self-reported or analytically confirmed) were specifically identified. For this reason, patients reporting the concomitant use of, or having positive toxicological tests for, ethanol and/or other drugs were excluded, as were presentations related to the use of synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists. The exclusion of synthetic cannabinoids was made on the basis of clinical history, and no confirmation by analytical tests was required. Similarly, the classification of edible natural or synthetic cannabis products was also based on data extracted from the medical reports, without laboratory investigation.

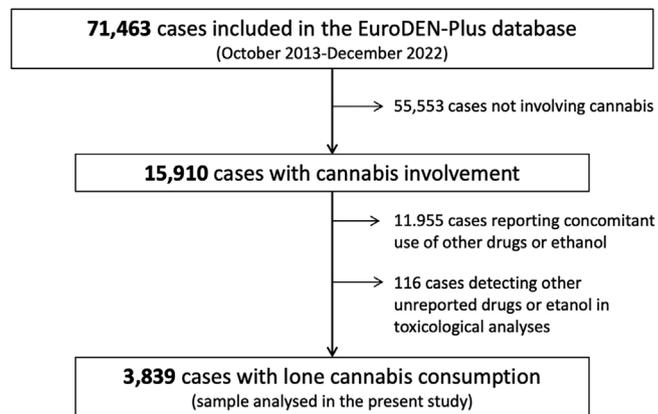
## Variables analysed

The following data were extracted from the Euro-DEN Plus database: (i) demographic data (age, sex and country); (ii) the presence of 14 pre-defined clinical features, including neuropsychiatric (hallucinations, agitation or aggressive behaviour, psychosis, anxiety, drowsiness/coma and seizures), cardiovascular (chest pain, palpitations, arrhythmia, hypotension and hypertensive crisis if systolic blood pressure was <90 mmHg or >180 mmHg, respectively, with potentially related symptoms being present) and other (vomiting, headache) symptoms; and (iii) four markers of case severity, which included the need for an ambulance to arrive at the ED, hospitalisation, intensive care unit (ICU) admission and death.

## Statistical analysis

The overall data are presented for all presentations related to lone cannabis use, with qualitative variables expressed as absolute numbers and percentages, and with quantitative variables expressed as median and interquartile range (IQR). Temporal trends in clinical features and severity were depicted using point estimates and fitted curves—linear and restricted cubic spline (RCS)—derived from logistic regression models to describe changes over time in symptom frequencies and severity markers.

First, we assessed the association between calendar year and each clinical symptom and severity marker under a simple linear time effect to test for overall increasing or decreasing trends across the study period. For each outcome, we fitted unadjusted and adjusted logistic regression models to estimate the odds ratio (OR) per 1-year increment



**FIGURE 1** Patient inclusion flow chart.

with 95% confidence intervals (95% CIs). Adjusted estimates were obtained from multi-level (mixed-effects) binary logistic regression with age, sex and year as fixed effects, and with centre as a random effect.

Second, to explore potential non-linear relationships over the 10-year period, we fitted RCS logistic regression models. RCS flexibly models associations using piecewise cubic polynomials joined at pre-specified knots and constrained to be linear in the tails. For each outcome, we modelled and drew probability curves for the symptom or severity marker as a function of calendar year, placing three knots at the 10th, 50th and 90th percentiles of the year distribution, as recommended by Harrell [17]. The magnitude of the effects of calendar year on outcomes were then displayed as dose–response curves showing ORs with 95% CIs, using 2013 as the reference year [18]. Adjusted analyses used the same covariates as the linear-effect models (age, sex, centre).

Finally, to assess the potential influence of  $\Delta 9$ -THC concentration on our findings, we estimated the OR (95% CI) per single percentage point increase in the mean  $\Delta 9$ -THC content of seized cannabis herb for each country–year for every symptom and severity marker. Estimates were derived from multi-level (mixed-effects) binary logistic regression with age, sex, calendar year and  $\Delta 9$ -THC concentration as fixed effects, and with a random intercept for centre. Concentration data were obtained from the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) [19].

All analyses were performed using SPSS 29 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) and STATA 13 (StataCorp LLC, College Station, TX, USA). To establish statistical significance, Bonferroni's correction for multiple comparisons was applied. To test changes in 14 clinical complaints and four severities over time, the widely used *P* cut-off for statistical significance (0.05) was divided by 18. Accordingly,  $P < 0.0028$  was considered statistically significant.

## Ethics

The study was undertaken in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Each centre had appropriate approval to collect the data. Written consent was not required as no data other than those collected as part of routine clinical care were included.

**TABLE 1** Demographic data and clinical characteristics and severity of presentations in patients presenting in the emergency department after lone cannabis consumption.

	All patients (n = 3839) n (%)	Missing values n (%)
<b>Demographical data</b>		
Age (in years), median (IQR)	25 (20–33)	4 (0.1)
Sex (male)	2703 (70.4)	0 (0)
<b>Countries</b> (total number of cases included in the EuroDEN Plus registry from 2013 to 2022)		
Netherlands (4389)	971 (25.3)	0 (0)
Malta (3921)	579 (15.1)	0 (0)
Spain (5117)	417 (10.9)	0 (0)
Switzerland (5580)	357 (9.3)	0 (0)
Belgium (4020)	306 (8.0)	0 (0)
UK (15859)	288 (7.5)	0 (0)
Norway (17145)	254 (6.6)	0 (0)
Bulgaria (398)	108 (2.8)	0 (0)
Ireland (5392)	79 (2.1)	0 (0)
Lithuania (968)	76 (2.0)	0 (0)
France (2753)	69 (1.8)	0 (0)
Romania (194)	61 (1.6)	0 (0)
Slovakia (490)	57 (1.5)	0 (0)
Estonia (824)	50 (1.3)	0 (0)
Italy (252)	43 (1.1)	0 (0)
Germany (1147)	27 (0.7)	0 (0)
Slovenia (857)	26 (0.7)	0 (0)
Poland (1033)	26 (0.7)	0 (0)
Denmark (357)	17 (0.4)	0 (0)
Latvia (307)	15 (0.4)	0 (0)
Georgia (68)	9 (0.2)	0 (0)
Cyprus (15)	2 (0.1)	0 (0)
Finland (253)	1 (0.0)	0 (0)
Turkey (54)	1 (0.0)	0 (0)
<b>Year</b>		
2013 (3 months, 7 centres)	19 (0.5)	
2014 (12 months, 14 centres)	102 (2.7)	
2015 (12 months, 14 centres)	89 (2.3)	
2016 (12 months, 16 centres)	149 (3.9)	
2017 (12 months, 26 centres)	286 (7.4)	
2018 (12 months, 27 centres)	727 (18.9)	
2019 (12 months, 29 centres)	679 (17.7)	
2020 (12 months, 27 centres)	554 (14.4)	
2021 (12 months, 25 centres)	497 (12.9)	
2022 (12 months, 24 centres)	737 (19.2)	
<b>Clinical data</b>		
<b>Neuropsychiatric symptoms</b>		
Anxiety	1351 (35.4)	20 (0.5)
Agitation or aggressive behaviour	820 (21.5)	18 (0.5)
Decreased alertness (drowsy or coma)	746 (20.6)	218 (5.7)

(Continues)

**TABLE 1** (Continued)

	All patients (n = 3839) n (%)	Missing values n (%)
Psychotic signs and symptoms	511 (13.4)	20 (0.5)
Hallucinations	416 (10.9)	19 (0.5)
Seizures	97 (2.5)	22 (0.6)
<b>Cardiovascular symptoms</b>		
Palpitations	715 (18.7)	21 (0.5)
Chest pain	463 (12.1)	22 (0.6)
Hypertensive crisis (>180 mmHg)	189 (5.0)	59 (1.5)
Hypotension (<90 mmHg)	109 (2.9)	58 (1.5)
Arrhythmia	57 (1.6)	58 (1.5)
<b>Other symptoms</b>		
Vomiting	764 (20.0)	23 (0.6)
Headache	263 (6.9)	21 (0.5)
Hyperthermia	17 (0.5)	123 (3.2)
<b>Severity markers</b>		
Brought to the ED by ambulance	2102 (56.3)	105 (2.7)
Hospitalisation	683 (18.5)	139 (3.6)
ICU admission	40 (1.0)	140 (3.6)
Death during the episode	3 (0.1)	4 (0.1)

Abbreviations: ED, emergency department; IQR, interquartile range; ICU, intensive care unit.

## RESULTS

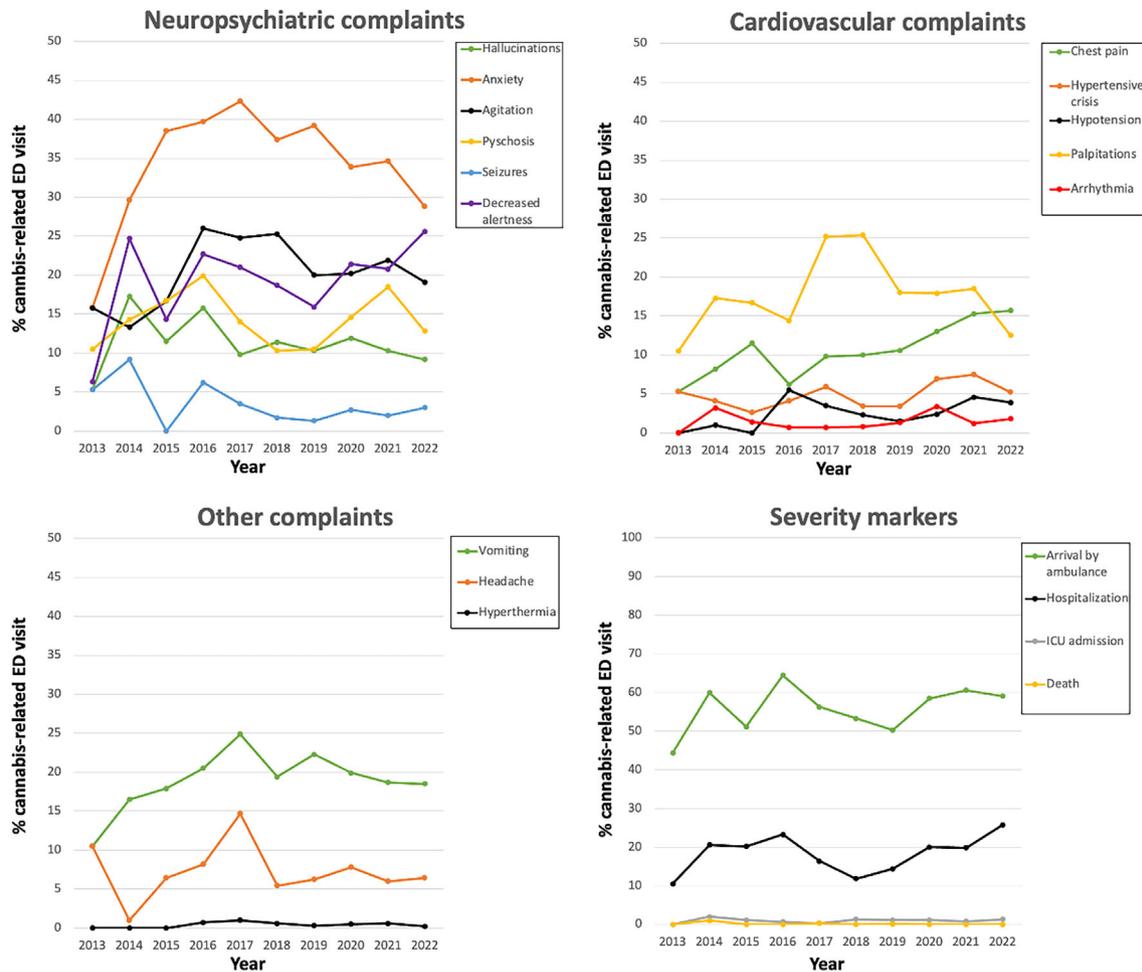
There were 71 463 presentations recorded in the Euro-DEN Plus registry between 1 October 2013 and 31 December 2022; of these, there were 3839 (5.4%) presentations with lone cannabis use (Figure 1). The median age of these lone cannabis presentations was 25 years (IQR = 20–33) and 71% were male. Over 25% of cases were from the Netherlands, with more than 10% from both Malta and Spain; overall, these three countries contributed 51% of the whole study sample. There was a wide range of proportions of lone cannabis-related ED visits among countries with respect to all patients included in the Euro-DEN Plus registry, with the highest proportions (>20%) registered in the Netherlands and Bulgaria, and the lowest proportions (<2%) registered in the UK, Ireland, Finland and Turkey (Table 1).

The most frequent clinical features were anxiety (35%), agitation (22%), decreased alertness (drowsiness or coma, 21%) and vomiting (20%), while seizures, arrhythmias and hyperthermia were the least frequently observed (<3% of presentations) (Table 1). The frequency of presentations over time is presented in Figure 2, and unadjusted estimations based on linear and RCS models are shown in Figure 3. A curvilinear relationship was observed in some cases, especially for anxiety and palpitations (with an increase in the middle years) and the need for hospitalisation (with a decrease in the middle years). When assessed by linear models, we found significant linear trends over time for four clinical complaints, with an increase in the proportion of presentations with chest pain and hypertensive crisis and a decrease in the proportion of presentations with anxiety and palpitations (despite

these two presentations having increased during the middle years). The other clinical features showed no significant pattern, while trends for hyperthermia could not be calculated as there were only 15 presentations with hyperthermia over the 10-year period. After adjustment, significant linear changes over time only persisted for yearly increases in hypertensive crises (OR = 1.168, 95% CI = 1.070–1.274) and hypotension (not statistically significant in the unadjusted analysis; OR = 1.239, 95% CI = 1.107–1.386), and for yearly decreases in palpitations (OR = 0.922, 95% CI = 0.883–0.962) (Table 2). Moreover, when non-linear models were used, significant mid-period increases for anxiety, agitation and arrhythmias that subsided by the end of the study were detected, while increases in chest pain and decreases in seizures that became significant in the latter half of the period were observed (Figure 4).

Regarding the severity of the episode, 76% of cases were brought to the ED by ambulance, 13% needed hospitalisation, 1% were admitted to ICU and 0.1% died (Table 1). We found a significant linear trend for increased hospitalisation, which disappeared in all the adjusted models (Figure 3; Table 2). Non-linear adjusted models do not show any significant association over time (Figure 4). Trends in mortality could not be calculated, as only three patients died during the index episode.

The mean  $\Delta 9$ -THC content of seized cannabis herb for country and year was available in 2784 out of the 3839 patients included in the study (73%). Analysis of the impact of  $\Delta 9$ -THC concentrations in cannabis herb did not render any significant relationship with clinical complaint frequency or severity of the index episodes (Figure 5).



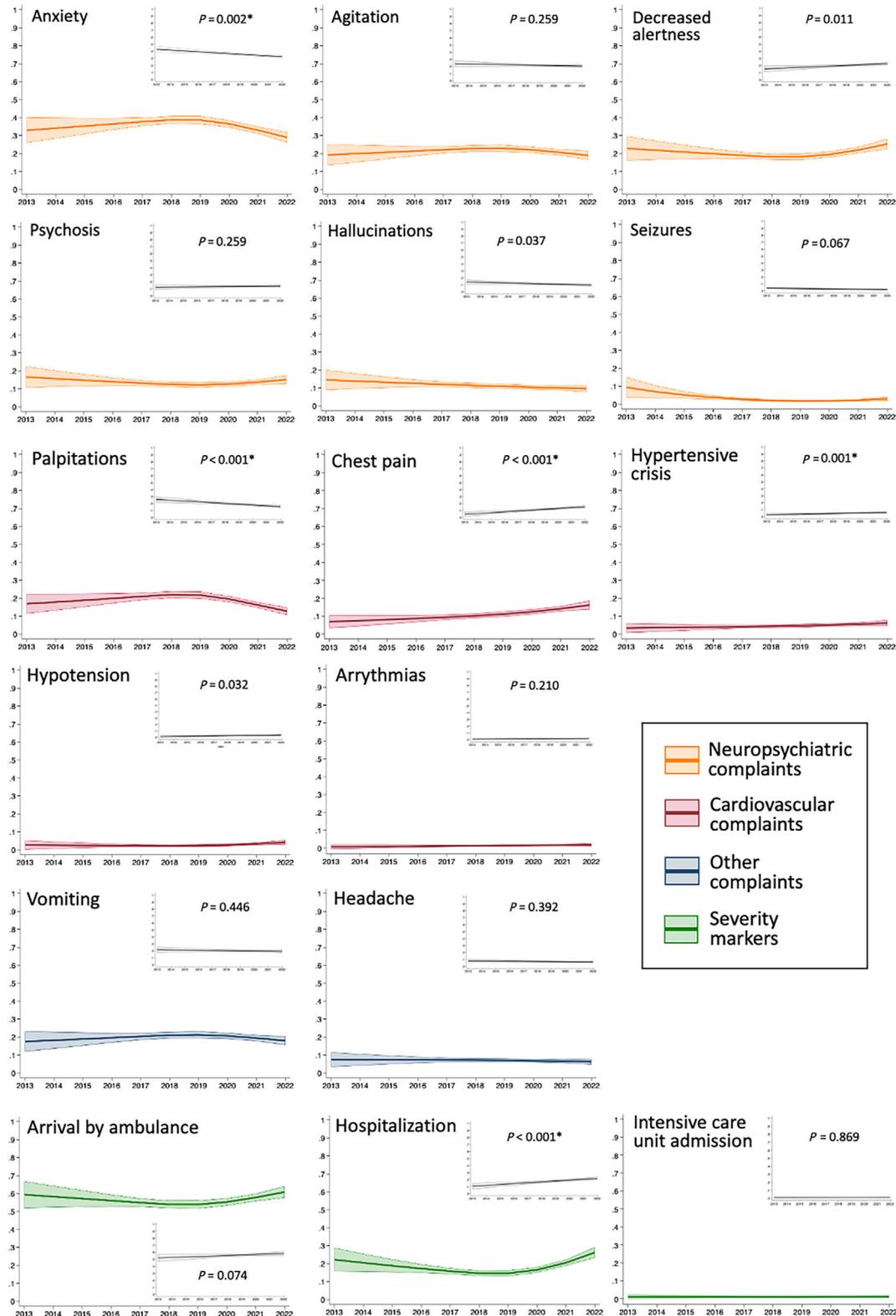
**FIGURE 2** Annual point estimations for the percentage of cases presenting to emergency departments (EDs) with each clinical complaint and with each severity marker.

## DISCUSSION

In the present multi-national study including a large series of patients attending a sample of European EDs, few changes were observed over time in drug-related complaints involving exclusively cannabis use. With regard to clinical features, only some linear changes in cardiovascular presentations were observed over the whole period (cases with hypotension and hypertensive crisis increased, whilst palpitations decreased). By contrast, non-linear significant changes could also be seen: mid-period increases for anxiety, agitation and arrhythmias that subsided by the end of the study were found, as well as increases in chest pain and decreases in seizures that became significant in the latter half of the period. These temporal changes may be driven by what was observed in the Netherlands, Malta and Spain, the countries that contributed around half of the cases in this series. Nonetheless, the results do not suggest an increase in severe clinical presentations or in the number of severe cases that attended the EDs over a 10-year period, as the need for ambulance, hospitalisation or admission to an ICU remained stable.

Some specific aspects of this study should be highlighted for the correct interpretation of the results. First, it was not designed to test

a direct relationship between changes in the clinical presentation and severity of acute cannabis-related ED visits and the potency of the cannabis products consumed by users. Although we tested the possible relationship of such  $\Delta 9$ -THC concentrations with patient symptomatology and severity, cannabis potency is not constant across European countries and for all cannabis products. Moreover, none of the national trends could be applied to the centres participating in the Euro-DEN Plus registry, as in large countries the  $\Delta 9$ -THC concentrations in cannabis herbs and resin can vary depending on different drug supply or distribution channels. Second, users can adapt their consumption doses to the potency of the product; therefore, changes in presentation and severity are not only related to cannabis potency but also to other unknown factors. As the general increasing trend in the potency of cannabis products over the last decades is undisputed [1–3, 20–22], the absence of gross changes in clinical presentation and severity between 2013 and 2022 would be consistent with consumer self-regulation. Finally, the present study analysed only cases of ‘lone’ cannabis intoxication, which refers to 5.4% of the cases included in the Euro-DEN Plus registry. Hypothetically, it is possible that the number of adverse events over time could be higher when cannabis is used in combination with alcohol or other drugs (which is



**FIGURE 3** Trends in the percentage of cases presenting to emergency departments (EDs) with each clinical complaint and with each severity marker. Trends were obtained using unadjusted restricted cubic spline models (large graphs) and linear models (small graphs inside the big graphs). \*Statistical significance after application of Bonferroni's correction for multiple comparisons ( $P < 0.0028$ , obtained by dividing 0.05 by 18 main clinical data and severity markers).

**TABLE 2** Analysis of unadjusted and adjusted temporal trends in the clinical findings and severity of cases.

Main clinical data	Unadjusted OR (95% CI) per every subsequent year	Adjusted OR (95% CI) per every subsequent year <sup>a</sup>
<b>Neuropsychiatric symptoms</b>		
Anxiety	0.950 (0.921–0.981) <sup>b</sup>	0.959 (0.924–0.995)
Agitation or aggressive behaviour	0.979 (0.943–1.016)	0.974 (0.934–1.016)
Decreased alertness (drowsy or coma)	1.052 (1.012–1.094)	1.048 (1.001–1.096)
Psychotic signs and symptoms	1.013 (0.968–1.059)	0.963 (0.916–1.012)
Hallucinations	0.950 (0.906–0.997)	0.951 (0.901–1.003)
Seizures	0.917 (0.835–1.006)	0.983 (0.888–1.088)
<b>Cardiovascular symptoms</b>		
Palpitations	0.929 (0.894–0.965) <sup>b</sup>	0.922 (0.883–0.962) <sup>b</sup>
Chest pain	1.127 (1.073–1.185) <sup>b</sup>	1.055 (0.999–1.114)
Hypertensive crisis (>180 mmHg)	1.083 (1.006–1.166) <sup>b</sup>	1.168 (1.070–1.274) <sup>b</sup>
Hypotension (<90 mmHg)	1.112 (1.009–1.226)	1.239 (1.107–1.386) <sup>b</sup>
Arrhythmia	1.087 (0.954–1.238)	1.018 (0.937–1.106)
<b>Other symptoms</b>		
Vomiting	0.985 (0.948–1.025)	1.041 (0.996–1.088)
Headache	0.974 (0.918–1.034)	1.035 (0.965–1.109)
Hyperthermia	NC (too few cases)	NC (too few cases)
<b>Severity markers</b>		
Brought to the ED by ambulance	1.029 (0.997–1.061)	1.054 (1.016–1.094)
Hospitalisation	1.090 (1.047–1.136) <sup>b</sup>	0.980 (0.935–1.027)
ICU admission	1.013 (0.873–1.175)	1.000 (0.919–1.087)
Death	NC (too few cases)	NC (too few cases)

Abbreviations: ED, emergency department; ICU, intensive care unit; NC, not calculable.

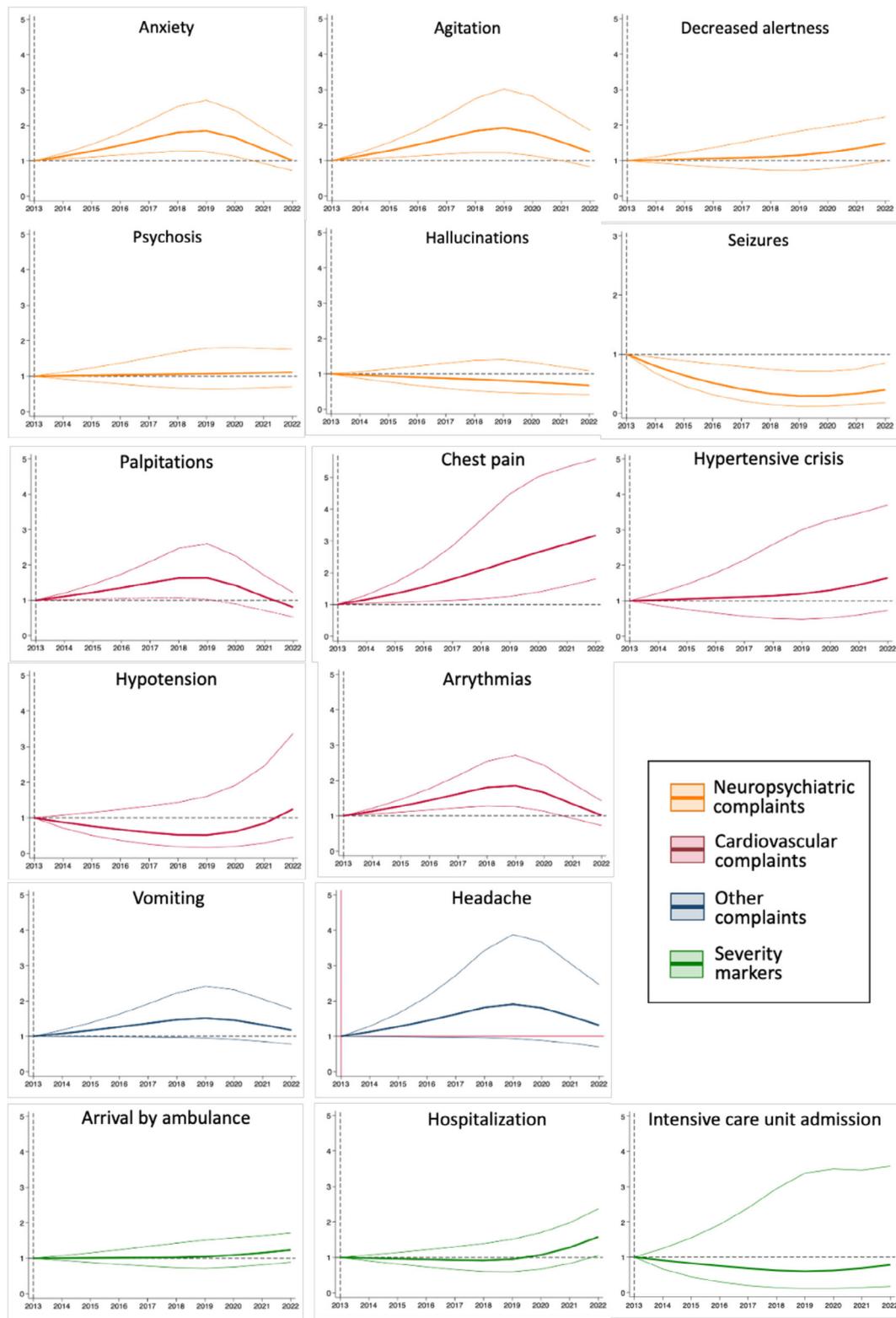
<sup>a</sup>Adjusted odds ratios were obtained by mixed multi-level binary logistic regression that included year, patient age and sex as fixed effects and centre as a random effect.

<sup>b</sup>Denotes statistical significance after application of Bonferroni's correction for multiple comparisons ( $P < 0.0028$ , obtained by dividing 0.05 by 18 main clinical data and severity markers).

usually the case, as this was observed in an additional 17% of EuroDEN Plus cases).

The predominant clinical features in our study are the same as and have similar percentages to those observed in previous studies analysing acute adverse events associated with cannabis use in different populations [10, 23], which, in our opinion, reinforces the consistency of the clinical findings in our sample. Cardiovascular symptoms were the only ones to show consistent temporal change, whereas neuropsychiatric symptoms remained relatively stable across the study period. We observed a transient mid-period increase in anxiety and agitation that resolved by the end of the study, and a significant decline in seizures, particularly in the final years. A recent study of 1697 symptomatic cannabis mono-intoxicated patients presenting to a single ED in Amsterdam (the Netherlands) reported a high frequency of cardiovascular symptoms (47.2% of cases). Palpitations were the most common, followed by syncope and chest pain, and remarkably, eight patients (0.5%) presented severe cardiovascular complications (three myocardial infarctions and five severe arrhythmias) [9].  $\Delta^9$ -THC activates the type-1 cannabinoid receptor. At low doses it causes endothelial dysfunction, atherosclerosis and sympathetic activation, while at high doses

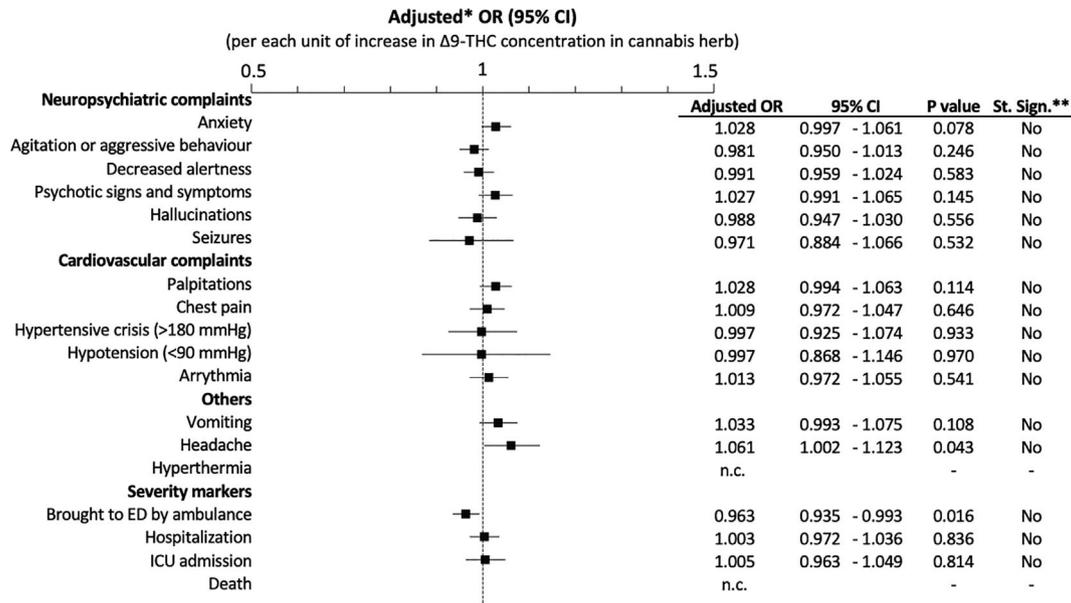
it can cause bradycardia and orthostatic hypotension. THC also activates inflammatory cytokines associated with cardiovascular disease. Finally, anxiety, psychosis or other neuropsychological manifestations (common in patients with acute cannabis use) cause tachycardia, which would explain some cases of hypertensive crisis (rather than hypotension) [24–26]. Although the full pathophysiology and clinical relevance of cardiovascular symptoms is largely unknown, serious cardiovascular complications may increase in the following years [9]. In addition, the present study also highlights the 'crude' increase in cases of chest pain ( $P < 0.001$ ), which becomes statistically significant in the second half of the period when this symptom is analysed using non-linear models, as well a mid-period increase in arrhythmias that subsided by the end of the study period. Recent work conducted in Denmark in 5400 patients using medical cannabis between 2018 and 2021 found an increased risk of arrhythmias, mainly atrial fibrillation, but found no differences in the development of acute coronary syndromes [27]. Therefore, although our data are not definitive, they warrant vigilance: health authorities should maintain enhanced surveillance over the coming years and consider the targeted monitoring of arrhythmias and acute coronary syndromes potentially associated with cannabis use.



**FIGURE 4** Adjusted odds ratios for each clinical complaint and severity marker over time, modelling these relationships with restricted cubic spline models. Dashed vertical lines correspond to the year taken as the reference (2013), horizontal dashed lines correspond to the reference odds ratio of 1, and coloured lines correspond to the adjusted odds ratios (thick lines) and 95% confidence interval limits (thin lines).

With regards to the severity of the cases presenting in the EDs, the need for an ambulance, hospitalisation and ICU admission seem to have remained unaltered over the years. We used these parameters

as indirect indicators of the overall clinical severity as the clinical data collected in the Euro-DEN Plus registry do not grade the intensity/severity of the most common features (such as anxiety and agitation



**FIGURE 5** Analysis of the association between  $\Delta 9$ -tetrahydrocannabinol concentrations in seized cannabis herb and clinical complaints and severity markers. \*An adjusted odds ratio for each clinical complaint and severity marker was obtained with adjusted model 3, which was produced by mixed multi-level binary logistic regression including year, patient age, sex, percentage of  $\Delta 9$ -tetrahydrocannabinol found in cannabis herb seizures during that year, and country of the centre as fixed effects, and including centre as a random effect. \*\*Statistical significance after application of Bonferroni's correction for multiple comparisons ( $P < 0.0028$ , obtained by dividing 0.05 by 18 main clinical data and severity markers). ED, emergency department; St. Sign., statistical significance; ICU, intensive care unit.

or other behavioural disturbances) in patients with cannabis intoxication. Therefore, a definitive conclusion about temporal trends in the severity of acute cannabis intoxication presenting in EDs cannot be firmly made. Moreover, very few deaths were recorded (three patients). All these findings must be interpreted in light of the fact that cannabis is the drug most commonly used in Europe (apart from alcohol) and is one of the drugs most frequently associated with drug-related events in EDs [28, 29]. Given the evolution of policies related to the liberalisation of cannabis use and availability, it is foreseeable that the number of users and, consequently, the related morbidity could increase in future years [30]. Concerns about cannabis legalisation includes the increase in use among young people, the higher prevalence of impaired driving, the risk of polysubstance use, societal normalisation of a once-illicit drug and the potential negative health effects of chronic cannabis use, particularly on the cognitive development of adolescents, among others [27]. Some recent studies have shown that marijuana legalisation is associated with increased rates of ED visits for marijuana-related complaints and an increased use of antipsychotic medications to control symptoms [31–33]. In addition to symptoms of acute marijuana intoxication, other presentations associated with chronic marijuana use, such as CHS and psychiatric presentations that may require urgent assessment and treatment in the ED, are also increasing in association with cannabis legalisation [34, 35].

## Limitations

First, this study retains the limitations inherent in the design of the Euro-DEN Plus data source, such as the fact that countries are

represented by centres usually located in large cities (which implies that the characteristics of populations living in small towns are under-represented), the lack of information on the context of drug use, and the interval between drug use and emergency treatment. Second, the selection of cases (consumption of cannabis alone) was based on the patient's declaration or the results of the toxicological analysis in the ED. Therefore, the presence of substances unknown to the user and not detected in the toxicology laboratory cannot be excluded [36]. The best example of this is the inability to analyse the role that undeclared synthetic and semi-synthetic cannabinoids contained in cannabis herbs or resins may play in the clinical picture of patients included in the present study [28, 37]. During the last few years, there has been an increase in reports of the detection of natural cannabinoids together with synthetic cannabinoids in at least 13 European countries, and most of the centres participating in the Euro-DEN Plus registry are still not able to detect these products [21]. On the other hand, it is possible that some cases with a positive laboratory test for cannabis could correspond to chronic consumption rather than to acute intoxication. This may lead to some misclassification and confounding, as some patient complaints recorded during the ED visit that were attributed to acute use may in fact correspond to chronic use, or may even be unrelated to cannabis. In addition, some patients could have been included on the basis of a positive laboratory test that indicates prior use but not acute intoxication. Third, more than half of the cases were from only three countries, which may distort the overall European picture of the problem. Fourth, the type of cannabis consumed (resin, herb, oil, edible product) and the route of administration (smoked, vaped, ingested) were also not considered and may have contributed to the intensity of symptoms or the

severity of the cases [30]. Fifth, the variables selected as a proxy for the severity of intoxication are subjective, and the need for hospitalisation or ICU admission are not homogeneous throughout Europe and may even differ from centre to centre in the same country. Sixth, although the present results were obtained using a large registry of more than 70 000 cases seen in the ED, the number of annual events for certain symptoms or severity markers was small, rendering the statistical power too low to rule out a beta error in some of the estimates (i.e. the existence of significant temporal trends for some of the variables evaluated cannot be ruled out with certainty). Finally, discrepancies between results from linear models (treating the entire period as a single trend) and non-linear models (allowing for flexible time effects) suggest that a longer follow-up period is needed to draw more definitive conclusions.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the increase in potency of cannabis-derived products in Europe in recent years, very few changes in the clinical complaints and the severity of acute events related to isolated cannabis use over the 10-year period analysed in this large European cohort were identified.

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## DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors have none to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are not publicly available but can be shared upon reasonable request.

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