A day after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that California's law can't protect her from arrest by federal drug agents, Hope Jones exited a Sacramento medicinal marijuana dispensary with a brown bag containing pot that she will smoke to control her blood pressure.

Jones, a 55-year-old mother of four who lives in Rancho Cordova, admitted being nervous Tuesday afternoon as she visited her regular supplier - Alternative Specialties on Folsom Boulevard - where marijuana plants are in view through shop windows.

"But even if I'm nervous, I don't have much choice but to come here," said Jones. "If this place were to close down, it would be like shutting down a pharmacy for me."

Jones and thousands of other California medicinal marijuana users Tuesday were weighing whether the Supreme Court decision would change how they get their pot. Though federal drug enforcement officials said the ruling won't shift their focus from cultivators and traffickers to users who are sick and dying, several users said they are worried.

The U.S. government has not recognized the medicinal value of pot, focusing instead on its addictive and detrimental effects.

Since California voters in 1996 passed Proposition 215 - dubbed the Compassionate Use Act - debate over marijuana's medicinal benefits has developed more fully here as researchers have focused on its therapeutic value.
For those who use pot, the debate is moot. Their questions now center on personal risk.

Will it be safer to grow their own plants, or is that more likely to bring trouble? Should they still patronize the dispensaries that may be targeted for raids by federal drug agents?

Jones, who smokes pot each morning for her blood pressure, said the answer for her is easy. "I don't have a clue about growing it myself; I don't think it's as simple as watering a plant in a pot," she said.

Juan Alvarez Jr., a 31-year-old leukemia patient, already had planted a marijuana plant at his south Sacramento home to provide some of his medicine and save money he'd been spending on pot at a dispensary.

After the court ruling, however, Alvarez said Tuesday he might be too nervous to keep it. "I'm not sure I feel safe to even have a plant in my house," he said during a rally at the federal courthouse in Sacramento, where about 40 people gathered to protest the ruling. "There's a 95 percent chance I'll get rid of it. I don't want to be arrested."

Alvarez said marijuana helps give him "strength to eat."

Seriously ill users such as Alvarez insist they would suffer greatly or even die without medicinal pot, but its illegal status has made such claims difficult for researchers to study.

Much of the research lately has come from California, where scientists and physicians have been able to tap into $8.7 million in public money made available when the Legislature created the Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research in San Diego.

Since 1999, researchers have focused on pot's effects on pain, chemotherapy-induced nausea, and spasticity and tremor in multiple sclerosis patients.

Dr. Mark Wallace, a pain specialist at the University of California, San Diego, tested marijuana's painkilling properties on 15 healthy volunteers by injecting their forearms with capsaicin, the same substance that makes red chili peppers hot.
When the test subjects received just the right dose of smoked pot, he said, their pain eased considerably.

"We were able to demonstrate that this has some pain-relieving effect in a very tightly controlled study," he said.

Wallace, who doesn't recommend marijuana to his patients now because he can't vouch for its source, would change his mind if the federal government removed the taboo and made pot available like prescription drugs.

"I see that there is some use of it, and it's safe," he said. "There is a minimal risk (of) addiction. But we're faced with that when we prescribe narcotics."

So far, drug companies have been reluctant to delve broadly into developing medicines using marijuana, though interest is growing. GW Pharmaceuticals, a British company, received approval from the Canadian government in April to sell an extract of cannabis called Sativex - a liquid sprayed under the tongue - for relief of neuropathic pain in multiple sclerosis patients. Pharmaceutical giant Bayer HealthCare is handling Sativex's marketing.

For now though, patients such as Jones and Alvarez are likely to rely on California's roughly 150 dispensaries to provide them with marijuana.

"Doctors could not control my blood pressure," Jones said. "I took every kind of medicine out there and only this has worked for me. I heard the feds say on the news (Monday) that they aren't going to go after a little old lady. ... That's me, so I hope they mean it."

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