

Substance Use in Older Adults: How to Recognize the Signs

People may see drug use as a young person's issue. But it is an issue for older adults, too. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) says it is "one of the fastest growing health problems facing the country."

Substances

Alcohol is the most used and misused drug. Older adults may socialize with beer, wine, or cocktails. Happy hour is a common event in assisted living and retirement communities. SAMHSA advises no more than one drink a day. Some people should not drink at all.

Older adults use *prescription drugs* more than any other age group. Misuse of these drugs is growing. It can affect decision-making, create dependence, or cause other harm. Commonly misused drugs are:

- Opioid pain meds such as Vicodin®, OxyContin® and Percocet®
- Benzodiazepine and anti-anxiety meds such as Ativan®, Valium® and Xanax®
- Sleep meds such as Ambien® and Lunesta®

Medical marijuana is legal in some states. Older adults may use it to manage or treat health symptoms. There is no good estimate of how many people use illegal marijuana.

The same is true for *illegal drugs*, such as cocaine, methamphetamines, and heroin. In the past, it was thought that people stopped using substances as they aged. Recent hospital records show this may no longer be true. In fact, the National Study on Drug Use and Health shows that illegal drug use in people older than 50 has more than doubled between 2002 and 2013.

Who is at risk?

Drug use touches all ethnic and social groups. Men who have had drug issues in the past have the highest risk. *Late onset* issues are more common for women. People who deal with a long-term health problem, pain, insomnia, or depression are also at risk.

Age-specific concerns

Older adults deal with a lot of loss. They may lose their sight or mobility. Their support networks shrink. Retirees may mourn their identity or financial security. They may miss their careers and work friends. Losing a spouse, a partner, or other loved ones can be painful. Older adults may use substances to "self-medicate" feelings of loneliness and loss.

As people age, drug use may have more consequences and risks. Bodies change with age. They lose muscle and body water. They digest and absorb things differently, often more slowly. Instead of leaving the body quickly, substances can build up to unsafe levels in the blood.

Also, older adults are more likely to deal with chronic health issues. Drugs and alcohol can make them worse. Common examples are:

- Diabetes
- Heart and liver issues
- Ulcers
- Cancer
- Sleep disorders
- Depression and anxiety

Drugs and alcohol do not mix well with medications. Some mixtures may not work well or may even be toxic. Examples include but are not limited to:

- Pain relievers
- Anti-inflammatory meds
- Heart and blood pressure meds
- Seizure meds
- Sleeping pills, tranquilizers, and sedatives
- Antidepressants
- Antibiotics
- Cold, flu, and allergy meds

It is vital for older adults to talk about their substance use with their doctors.

Signs of substance misuse in older adults

Drug misuse among older adults is not identified or reported enough:

- Clear signs like missing work or being drunk in public are not as common in older adults.
- Many people do not know substance use can be a problem for older adults.
- Loved ones may read signs of substance use as a normal part of aging.

Awareness is the key to identifying substance use and misuse among older adults. Symptoms to watch for include:

- Changes in appetite, personality, or behavior
- More health problems or confusion
- Decline in appearance or hygiene
- Unclear or slurred speech
- Anger or panic when asked about drug and alcohol use

Treatment

Treatment varies for older adults. The type and pace of care depend on a person's situation. Experts advise a screening and intervention. This can include assessment, counseling, education, and goal setting. Professionals may offer referrals to medical and other services if needed.

Successful treatment plans are:

- Supportive and age specific
- Helpful in building support networks
- Focused on developing coping skills
- Run by qualified and skilled professionals
- Take place in individual or group settings

Resources

National Council on Aging

(571) 527-3900

www.ncoa.org

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

www.niaaa.nih.gov

Recovery.org

(888) 255-3773

www.recovery.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

(877) 726-4727

www.samhsa.gov

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