NCADD
NATIONAL COUNCIL ON ALCOHOLISM AND DRUG DEPENDENCE, INC.

Seniors and Drugs

The baby boomers are coming! High rates of lifetime illegal drug use among the baby boom generation, people born between 1946 and 1964, suggest that the number of older adults using illegal drugs will increase in the next two decades. In fact, it has been predicted that by the year 2020, the **number of persons needing treatment for a drug abuse and addiction will double** among persons aged 50 or older.

- In 2008, 4.3 million adults aged 50 or older, or 4.7% of adults in that age range, had used an illegal drug in the past year.
- Between 2000 and 2008, substance abuse treatment admissions among those aged 50 and older increased by 70%, while the overall 50-plus population grew by only 21%.

FACT: 1 out of every 8 people seeking help for substance abuse, including illegal drugs, prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs (OTC) is over age 50.

Coping with an increase in addiction among older adults is a challenge that most aging people never thought they would have to face. Neither did their families. But, dealing with addiction among older adults requires our immediate attention.

MYTH: There is no point in seeking treatment- it's too late to change.

FACT: Good news! The recovery rate for older adults in addiction treatment is as good or better than that for younger people.

MYTH: Older adults suffering from drug addiction lack the inner strength to fight and overcome this disease.

REALITY: Addiction has many possible causes but lack of inner strength is not one of them. Causes of addiction include heredity, stressful events such as the death of a loved one, retirement, health problems and reactions to medicine.

General Warning Signs of a Drug Problem with Older Adults

Caution: Some general warning signs of drug abuse and addiction can be seen as a normal part of the aging process or attributed to other diseases, resulting in a missed diagnosis of the addiction.

- Sleep problems, fatigue, memory loss or mood swings
- Chronic health problems, accidents or falls
- Loss of interest in hobbies or other social activities
- Neglect of personal hygiene, appearance or weight loss
- Unsteady gait, unexplained bruises or frequent fall
- Slurring words, defensiveness or increased stress

Specific Signs of Drug Abuse or Addiction Among Older Persons

Note: The following are specific signs of drug abuse and addiction and less likely to be seen as a normal part of the aging process or attributed to other diseases.

- Finding illegal drugs or drug paraphernalia
- Is often clearly under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Complaining about doctors who refuse to write prescriptions for preferred addictive drugs
- Increased use of illegal drugs or taking more pills than prescribed because the drugs “just aren’t helping anymore”
- Intentionally abusing drugs with the intent to hurt themselves
- Mixing medications or drinking alcohol with medications despite warnings not to do so
- Going to multiple doctors -“doctor shopping” -for additional prescriptions of addictive drugs
- Deliberate choice to not tell doctor of all prescriptions or illegal drugs they may be taking

Prescription Drugs and Older Adults:

Although people 65 years of age and older comprise only 13% of the population, they account for almost 30% of all medications prescribed in the United States.

As a result, older adults are at significant risk for prescription drug abuse and addiction. In addition to prescription medications, many older adults also use over-the-counter (OTC) medicines and dietary supplements, including sharing them with friends. Due to increased rate of illness, changes in the body's capacity to process medications, and the potential for drug interactions, older adults are more likely to experience adverse health consequences than the younger population.

CAUTION FOR OLDER ADULTS: Beware of drug interactions as well as alcohol and drug combinations, as they can be very dangerous, increasing the risk of falls, accidents and even accidental overdose. Follow the advice of your physician and only take prescription medications as directed.

Recovery and Seniors: By choosing recovery, seniors can re-claim their lives and find meaning in their later years. Mutual Aid and Self-Help programs are invaluable to recovery and will help seniors find new purpose.

"It's time to face up to it, I'm getting older and I just don't need drugs to keep living. In fact, I'm going to get my life back on track, based on what I have learned in treatment. I don't want to die!" - From an anonymous baby boomer, age 55

NCADD Fact Sheet: Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Among Older Adults

Seniors may be alone, may feel lonely even around others, but they **"don't have to go it alone."** If you are concerned about your own use of alcohol or drugs, Get Help. If you are concerned about a member of your family or friend, For Family or Friends.

Or Find an Affiliate near you.