

Substance Abuse and Misuse Among Older Adults

Substance abuse and misuse may not readily come to mind as a health concern for the elderly, but it is a growing problem for an increasing number of older Americans. Elderly people make up only 13 percent of the population, but purchase 70 percent of over-the-counter drugs and account for approximately one-third of all medications prescribed in the United States. Nearly one in five elderly either drink alcohol or use medications unsafely.

People age 65 or older are especially susceptible to alcohol and drug abuse or misuse because changes caused by age can make the body respond differently. The same amount of alcohol that had minimal effect before can make an older person feel drunk. Medications may remain longer in the system of an elderly adult because the filtering capacity of the kidneys has decreased over time. Combining alcohol and certain drugs can cause dangerous interactions, such as increasing the effects of sedatives or weakening the effects of blood thinners³.

Misusing medications usually is unintentional. It may occur when a prescription is not filled, medications are taken longer or discontinued earlier than directed, drugs are borrowed or shared, or doses are skipped, doubled or taken at the incorrect time. Factors that can contribute to misuse are typically related to age and can include:

- Physical effects of aging such as the liver taking longer to break down certain drugs or the stomach taking longer to empty.
- Physical ailments that make opening a bottle difficult, problems swallowing pills, not hearing medication instructions, or complicated dosage schedules.
- Psychological problems such as failing memory or cognitive impairment.
- Language or cultural barriers that may impede treatment.
- Using less medicine than the prescribed amount due to the high cost of the drug or transportation issues to get to a pharmacy to fill a prescription.

Indicators of alcohol abuse or misuse may be more difficult to identify in an older person compared to a younger adult. Because most elderly are retired, they tend to drink at home and are less likely to miss work due to drinking⁴. Falls, confusion or physical problems may be incorrectly associated with aging rather than alcohol dependence.

Warning signs of alcohol or medication-related problems may be easily overlooked for a number of reasons. The condition can mimic other common medical or behavioral problems, such as diabetes, dementia or depression. Older adults may be embarrassed about their situation and reluctant to seek help. If an elderly person sees more than one physician, each doctor may not have a complete picture of the patient's treatment plan. Symptoms of substance problems may include irritability, memory loss, lack of interest in usual activities, poor hygiene and nutrition, chronic pain, difficulty paying attention, or depression.

Fortunately, treatment is available for older adults and the elderly often recover from substance problems better than a younger person. For more information about alcohol and drug abuse or misuse, talk with your primary care doctor or visit the Geriatric Mental Health Foundation website at www.gmhfonline.org.