



Drug Use by Senior Citizens Increasing

The baby boomer generation (people born between 1946 and 1964) experienced higher rates of drug use than the generations before and after them, and now that baby boomers are aging into retirement, the rate of drug use among seniors is rapidly increasing.

Alcohol and drug abuse adversely affects approximately 20% of older Americans, and more than 25% of older adults use prescription medicines that have a high potential for causing addiction. This increase in drug use by aging parents is creating problems for employees who have to miss work to care for them.

Older adults are more likely to experience chronic health problems and often take prescribed medication for longer periods of time than younger adults, which can result in an increased risk of misuse and abuse of medication leading to addiction. Combining prescription medicine with alcohol makes the problem much worse and puts older adults at greater health risk.

Having to deal with an alcoholic or drug addicted parent can be a stressful and time-consuming problem for employees, and the issue of caring for an elderly parent who is addicted is more common than most people realize.

It is important, then, for adult children of elderly parents to be aware of the danger of addiction occurring later in life and to know the warning signs.

Drug Addiction Among the Elderly—Warning Signs

There are some indicators of the potential for addiction to watch for in aging parents.

Being lonely or isolated because of the death of a spouse can lead to substance abuse. Adult children who have been living at home suddenly moving out and leaving the individual alone can result in excessive alcohol or drug use. Major surgery that requires the use of risky pain medications such as narcotic painkillers can also be a red flag.

Here are some other warning signs to be on the lookout for:

- Neglecting to pay bills
- Heavy drinking before, during, or after meals and at holiday get-togethers
- Irresponsible gambling
- Loss of interest in hobbies
- Lack of self-care and poor hygiene
- Memory loss
- Stopping participation in recreational activities
- Behavior changes like becoming hostile or depressed
- Becoming easily confused and/or disoriented

One reason that older adults are at risk of developing an addiction to their medicine is because of increased medication sensitivity and slower metabolism and elimination. As people age, it becomes more difficult for alcohol and medicines to be cleared from the body. Senior citizens also often experience higher rates of pain, sleep problems, and anxiety, and many rely on prescription medicine to function. Too often, elderly adults attempt to self-medicate with alcohol and over-the-counter remedies that can cause adverse reactions with prescription medications.

According to the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), more than 1 million individuals aged 65 or older had a substance use

disorder last year, including 978,000 older adults with an alcohol use disorder and 161,000 with an illicit drug use disorder. Illegal drug use (use of illicit street drugs and abuse of prescription medication) among adults aged 50 or older is projected to increase from 2.2% to 3.1% by 2020.

While alcohol and drug abuse is harmful at any age, it is never more harmful than on the elderly. The impact of alcohol- and drug-related injuries is much more severe, the risk of harmful medication interactions is much greater, and the general physical effects of alcohol and drugs are more debilitating.

It is a sad situation when senior citizens, who should be receiving honor in their old age, have to experience the negative consequences of substance use, including physical and mental health issues, social and family problems, involvement with the criminal justice system, and death from drug overdose.

Caring for Aging Parents

Alcohol and drug problems, particularly prescription drug abuse, among older adults is one of the fastest growing health problems facing the country, and more and more employees are having to deal with the issues caused by elderly parents who have become addicted.

For those who are dealing with health conditions (like addiction and other

health problems) of parents and other family members, the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) provides for 12 weeks of unpaid leave. But to qualify, you must have worked for at least 1 year for an employer that has 50 or more employees. Currently, there is no federal law that requires employers to give consideration to employees with family responsibilities other than the FMLA.

However, most employers, when made aware of a worker who is struggling with a family member's health problems, will try to accommodate the employee if possible. Many companies offer flexibility to their workers to help ease the burden for both the company and the employee.

If you have an aging parent or loved one who is suffering from addiction or other chronic health problems, start by having a direct and open conversation with your supervisor about the issue. Ask if your schedule can be altered to allow for treatment appointments or if telecommuting options are available 1 or 2 days a week. Reasonable leave options might also be an option, and taking sick days to care for a family member is a basic benefit offered by most companies.

Also, be sure to seek help for yourself as caring for an addicted person can be stressful and tiring. Organizations like ReACT (Respect a Caregiver's Time), <https://respectcaregivers.org/>, offer monthly support sessions that focus on the caregivers' emotional needs.