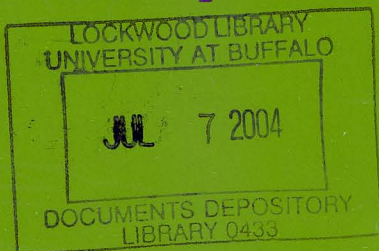


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# Older adults and substance use disorders

*A guide to recovery from misuse,  
dependency or addiction problems*



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
Center for Substance Abuse Treatment  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)



Americans are living longer than ever before. It is estimated that one out of every five adults, age 60 or older, misuses alcohol and/or prescription drugs and is in need of treatment.

As people age, they may encounter a wide range of physical and mental challenges. This makes identifying and diagnosing substance use disorders more difficult. Symptoms of substance use disorders often are overlooked or misdiagnosed as depression, dementia and other health problems associated with aging.

Health care providers, however, are becoming increasingly aware of the potential for substance use disorders among older adults. But older adults themselves, and those who care about them, must play active roles in addressing the problem.

Many family members, and older adults, often are reluctant to discuss misuse, dependency or addiction problems. They may be ashamed or feel others will not understand. They even may think that if someone of advanced age is misusing alcohol or drugs to cope with loneliness or physical discomfort, it is too late to change the behavior. The truth is, the lives of thousands of older adults could be improved if they just received proper treatment.

### *What is a substance use disorder?*

A substance use disorder is the misuse, dependence or addiction to alcohol and/or legal or illegal drugs. Older adults can develop a substance use disorder, even without knowing it, for many reasons. Age-related changes in the body can have a tremendous

impact on an older person's sensitivity to the effects of alcohol. In addition, the correct dose of prescription medication needed to



treat any given illness or condition can vary considerably from person to person. This vulnerability to alcohol and drugs is compounded by the fact that older adults usually take more medications than the average person, which makes diagnosing

a substance use disorder challenging. The only way to accurately identify a problem is through proper screening and assessment by a qualified professional.

### *How do I know if I, or an older adult I care about, has a substance use disorder?*

First, be alert to the fact that older adults typically may begin misusing or abusing alcohol and/or medications following a major life change, such as the death of a spouse, a divorce, a prolonged acute illness or retirement. Second, recognize that alcohol use should be monitored since it often interacts in harmful, even fatal, ways with prescribed medications. And third, remember that the more medications someone is taking, the higher the risk of misuse, whether intentional or accidental.



Subtle interactions among prescription medications often are hard to identify if an older adult's health care provider is not fully aware of all the substances and medications being taken. It therefore is critical to inform

the health care provider of all prescribed medications and dosages, and if excessive alcohol or illegal drug use is occurring. This will help decrease the likelihood of intentional misuse, as well as the possibility of accidental over-medication or adverse drug interactions. It is also important that the older adult fully understands and follows the directions of any prescription medication carefully.

### *Where can I go to find help?*

As the number of older adults in America grows, so too does the number of treatment services and programs available to assist those who have substance use disorders, and the people who care for them. If you think you, or someone you know, may have a problem with alcohol or any legal or illegal drug, help is available. The resources listed in this brochure can assist you in identifying treatment programs and services that can meet your needs. Just one phone call can help you set a course for recovery that leads to a fuller and healthier life.



*Where there's help, there's hope.*

## **Federal Resources:**

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**  
5600 Fishers Lane, Parklawn Building, Suite 13C-05  
Rockville, MD 20857  
www.samhsa.gov • www.findtreatment.samhsa.gov

### **SAMHSA's National Helpline**

800-662-HELP (Toll-Free)  
800-487-4889 (TDD) (Toll-Free)  
877-767-8432 (Spanish) (Toll-Free)

### **SAMHSA's Center for Mental Health Services**

5600 Fishers Lane, Parklawn Building, Room 17-99  
Rockville, MD 20857  
301-443-2792 • www.cmhs.samhsa.gov

### **SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment**

5600 Fishers Lane, Rockwall II, 8th Floor  
Rockville, MD 20857  
301-443-5052 • www.csat.samhsa.gov  
www.asyouage.gov

### **SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention**

5600 Fishers Lane, Rockwall II, 9th Floor  
Rockville, MD 20857  
301-443-0365 • www.csap.samhsa.gov

## **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging**

Washington, DC 20201  
202-619-0724 • www.aoa.gov

## **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Institutes of Health**

**National Institute on Aging**  
Building 31, Room 5C27  
31 Center Drive, MSC 2292  
Bethesda, MD 20892  
301-496-1752 • www.nia.nih.gov

## **Non-Federal Resources:**

*This is just a sampling of available resources.  
Inclusion does not constitute endorsement.*

### **American Association of Retired Persons**

601 E Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20049  
800-424-3410 (Toll-Free) • www.aarp.org

### **The National Council on the Aging**

300 D Street, SW, Suite 801  
Washington, DC 20024  
202-479-1200 • 202-479-6674 (TDD)  
www.ncoa.org

### **Positive Aging Resource Center**

(Supported, in part, by a grant from SAMHSA)  
www.positiveaging.org

DHHS Publication No. (SMA) 04-3942

NCADI Publication No. PHD1079

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