

Prescription Drug Misuse in the Elderly

Substance use issues are not limited to adolescents and younger adults. It is common for elderly loved ones to suffer from several mild illnesses, so physicians may not question their requests for multiple prescriptions. Today, growing numbers of older adults are becoming addicted to prescription medications such as OxyContin and Vicodin. Various life changes such as divorce, an empty nest, or the loss of a parent or a spouse, can lead to an increase in the misuse of drugs. These life changes, as well as the onset of anxiety or stress, may lead an older person to feel more socially isolated and turn to addictive substances to self-medicate.

Signs & Symptoms

The signs of substance use disorder in elderly patients can be harder to diagnose, as some of the signs also come with old age. It is important to be cautious with the elderly, as the signs of drug misuse may not necessarily mean they have become addicted to their prescription medications. The following signs may indicate a misuse of medications:

- They have multiple medical conditions that require high-risk prescriptions.
- Their chronic pain is higher than average.
- They switch physicians and only keep appointments related to pain medication.
- Their personal hygiene has decreased recently.
- They are frequently "losing" their medications.
- At the first visit to a physician, they demand a prescription for a high-risk medication.
- They ask for early refills on their prescriptions.

Challenges of Prescription Misuse in Older Adults

Older adults are also more likely to experience physical illness than younger people, therefore physicians more commonly prescribe them drugs to combat the pain associated with their illnesses. In older adults, chronic pain is often managed with strong opioid medications like OxyContin, Percocet, or Vicodin, and it is common for physicians to overlook the potential for addiction. Although there are various strategies to managing pain in older adults that do not involve prescription opioids, opioids still tend to be over-prescribed in this age group.

If you or an elderly loved one you know is struggling with substance use disorder, please call our 24-Hour Helpline at 1.800.928.8000. We can help.

Source – Center on Addiction: <https://www.centeronaddiction.org/the-buzz-blog/what-you-need-know-about-opioid-addiction-and-older-adults>