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Healthy Aging Health Center

Drug Abuse on the Rise in Baby Boomers

Marijuana, Cocaine, Heroin, Prescription Drug Abuse Increasing in People Aged 50 and Older, Study Shows

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WebMD Health News

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June 17, 2010 -- Drug abuse among Americans aged 50 and older has risen sharply in recent years, with admissions for treatment nearly doubling between 1992 and 2008, new research indicates.

Although alcohol is still the leading substance abuse cause of hospital admissions for people in this age group, studies show older Americans are also turning to illicit drugs in large numbers.

A study of admissions data by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), part of the Department of Health and Human Services, finds that:

Marijuana abuse exploded among the older age group in the period studied, with admissions for treatment rising from 0.6% to 2.9%.

Cocaine abuse nearly quadrupled, from 2.9% to 11.4%.

Heroin abuse more than doubled, from 7.2% to 16%.

[Prescription drug abuse](#) jolted from 0.7% to 3.5%.

Admissions related to [alcohol abuse](#) decreased from 84.6% in 1992 to 59.9% in 2008, but it is still the main cause of treatment for substance abuse, according to the SAMHSA research.

But the study also reports that the proportion of older Americans seeking help for using multiple substances nearly tripled from 13.7% in 1992 to 39.7% in 2008.

The report finds that:

The proportion of older people treated for admissions involving alcohol abuse in combination with cocaine abuse more than tripled, from 5.3% in 1992 to 16.2% in 2008.

Although more than 75% of all older people admitted for abuse started using their primary substance of abuse by age 25, an increasing proportion involved substances they had begun using within five years of admission, the research says.

In 2008, cocaine abuse was the leading primary cause of admissions involving drugs used for the first time in the past five years, at 26.2%. But prescription drug misuse came in a close second at 25.8%.

"The graying of drug users in America is an issue for many programs and communities providing health or social services for seniors," says SAMHSA administrator Pamela S. Hyde. "These findings show the changing scope of substance abuse problems in America."

Kathy Greenlee, assistant secretary for aging at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, says it's "troubling" to see an increasing number of older Americans "struggling with substance abuse."

She says in a news release that the problem needs to be tackled now "for the benefit of each individual as well as a generation of baby boomers on the doorstep of old age."

She also says that "a critical aspect of [senior health](#) is the ability to be free of alcohol and drug addiction."

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health estimates that 4.7% of adults 50 and older used illicit drugs in the past year and that 2.9% of these people were either dependent on alcohol or abused it.

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Another SAMHSA report, from the Drug Abuse Warning Network that examines emergency room visits involving nonmedical use of narcotic medications among people aged 12 or older, says the non-medical use of prescription pain relievers is also a growing problem. The report says that:

The estimated number of emergency department visits for narcotic pain relievers rose from 144,644 in 2004 to 305,885 in 2008, an increase of 111%.

Emergency visits involving [oxycodone](#) and [hydrocodone](#) products, and [methadone](#), increased 152%, 123%, and 73%, respectively, in the same time period.

Prescription pain relievers can have serious health consequences when taken without medical supervision, in larger amounts than prescribed or in combination with alcohol or other prescription or over-the-counter drugs, the DAWN report says.

Emergency department visits between 2004 and 2008 more than doubled for both male and female patients, 110% and 113% respectively. Also:

Emergency visits for prescription drug abuse increased 113% for patients younger than 21 and 112% for people 21 and older.

Emergency room visits increased for nonmedical use of oxycodone, hydrocodone, methadone, morphine, fentanyl, and [hydromorphone](#) products.

"The findings reported here highlight the need to strengthen prevention and education programs designed to reduce the misuse of [prescription drugs](#)," the report says.

Doctors need to continue to be warned about these emerging prescription drug problems "to help them understand the importance of exercising care" in writing scripts for them, the report says.

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