

Substance Use Disorder in Older Adults: A Guide for Patients & Families

Substance use disorder (SUD) can affect older adults, though it is often under-recognized. It may involve alcohol, prescription medications, or other substances. In older adults, even small amounts of substances can have significant effects due to changes in metabolism, medical conditions, and medication interactions. Early recognition and treatment can improve safety, health, and quality of life.

Common Substances Involved

- Alcohol
- Prescription medications (such as benzodiazepines, opioids, or sleep aids)
- Over-the-counter medications
- Illicit substances (less common but possible)

Why Older Adults Are at Risk

- Chronic pain or medical illness
- Loneliness or social isolation
- Loss of a spouse or major life changes
- Depression or anxiety
- Long-term use of prescribed medications
- Changes in how the body processes substances

Warning Signs Caregivers May Notice

- Increased use of alcohol or medications
- Taking medications differently than prescribed
- Memory problems or confusion
- Frequent falls or unsteadiness
- Mood changes such as irritability or depression
- Poor hygiene or neglect of responsibilities
- Social withdrawal

Health Risks in Older Adults

- Increased risk of falls and injuries
- Medication interactions
- Worsening memory or confusion
- Liver or kidney problems
- Sleep disturbances
- Increased risk of hospitalization

When to Seek Medical Help

- Concerns about increasing substance use
- Sudden changes in behavior or cognition
- Signs of withdrawal (tremors, sweating, agitation)
- Falls or injuries related to substance use
- Mixing substances with medications

Treatment Options

Medical Care

- Supervised detoxification if needed
- Medication management
- Treatment of coexisting medical conditions

Therapy and Support

- Individual counseling
- Group therapy or support groups
- Family involvement in treatment
- Addressing underlying depression or anxiety

Ways Families Can Help

- Approach the topic with concern, not judgment
- Encourage open communication
- Support medical and mental health care
- Help monitor medication use
- Promote social engagement and healthy routines

National Organizations & Resources

✓ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

☎ 1-800-662-HELP | 🌐 [samhsa.gov](https://www.samhsa.gov)

✓ National Institute on Drug Abuse

🌐 [nida.nih.gov](https://www.nida.nih.gov)

✓ National Council on Aging

🌐 [ncoa.org](https://www.ncoa.org)

✓ Eldercare Locator

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 [eldercare.acl.gov](https://www.eldercare.acl.gov)

Final Notes

- Substance use disorder can occur at any age, including later life.
- Early recognition can prevent serious complications.
- Compassionate support and appropriate treatment can lead to improvement.