Approximately 2.7 million older adults reported ever misusing prescription drugs in 2012, compared with 2.0 million in 2011.¹

In 2012, significantly more adults aged 65 or older reported lifetime misuse of prescription drugs than in 2011—that is, their use in a manner not prescribed or intended by a physician.¹ This represents a growing public health problem among older adults.

Much of this growth is attributed to the aging of the baby boom cohort (born between 1946 and 1964).² Four This cohort had higher rates of illicit drug use as teenagers and young adults than did older cohorts. In fact, continued growth in older adults’ misuse of prescription drugs is projected, and may become more pronounced, as the 60–64 age group (persons born from 1948 to 1952) continues to age into the 65 and older age range, followed in turn by the younger baby boomers (aged 50–59).³ Four This is due in part to a higher frequency of prescription and illicit drug use seen in persons aged 50–59 and persons aged 60-64, which could portend higher misuse as these individuals age.

Persons aged 65 and older constitute 13 percent of the U.S. population. Fully one-third of all prescriptions in the United States are written for these older adults.⁶

In 2012, approximately 442,000 adults aged 65 or older reported having misused a prescription drug within the past month.¹ Past-year prescription drug misuse is tied with marijuana use as the most commonly reported category of illicit drugs among older adults.⁷ Eight

Prescription drug misuse among older adults is rooted in their increased risk of experiencing chronic pain—both physical and emotional—ranging from musculoskeletal disorders and physical trauma (e.g., as a result of falls) to anxiety, depression, loss of family members, and social isolation.⁹ Ten Controlled substances also are more likely to be prescribed long term to older adults for what are perceived to be chronic conditions, and the appropriateness of these prescriptions may not be sufficiently reviewed.¹¹ Older adults may also be at high risk for the indicated side effects of some prescription medicines or for their interactive effects when taken with other medications.

Misuse Increases With Age

Intentional prescription drug misuse among older adults is relatively rare, particularly among individuals who lack a history of substance abuse.¹² However, medical exposure to prescription drugs with abuse potential is a risk factor associated with drug abuse in older adults. The misuse of prescribed drugs among individuals undergoing treatment for substance use problems increases markedly with age.¹³ Other risk factors include social isolation, a history of a mental health or substance use disorder, and female gender.¹⁴ Problems related to the misuse of these drugs may be exacerbated when increasingly frail older adults who are experiencing adverse changes in cognition take inappropriate doses of these medications, consume them for the wrong reasons, or combine them with alcohol.⁶ Dementia may be particularly problematic because of resulting challenges to the ability of older individuals to read and understand medication labels and also to remember whether they took their medications as indicated.¹⁴

Pain: An Underlying Cause of Prescription Drug Misuse Among Older Adults

Pain relievers are the most commonly misused types of prescription drugs among older adults.³,¹³ Chronic pain is by far the most common reason for misuse of prescription pain medications.¹⁵
References


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