



Misuse and abuse of prescription drugs by adults over age 65 is a growing, but largely unrecognized public health problem. Because drug abuse is perceived as a problem of the young, and symptoms of drug misuse may mimic cognitive and physical signs of aging, drug use problems in older adults often go undetected.

How Older Adults Misuse Prescription Drugs

Older adults use more prescription and over-the-counter medications than any other age group increasing the potential for misuse by:

- Taking medications with alcohol
- Taking higher doses or for longer time periods than prescribed
- Using medications not prescribed for them
- Taking medications in combinations that cause drug interactions
- “Self-medicating” to relieve anxiety, pain or sadness

Drugs Most Commonly Misused by Older Adults

The classes of drugs most frequently prescribed to older adults (for conditions such as joint pain, insomnia, grief and anxiety) are also those with the highest potential for dependence and addiction, and include:

- Opioid pain relievers (such as Vicodin, OxyContin)
- Sedatives and tranquilizers (such as Valium, Xanax)

Health Concerns Associated with Prescription Drug Misuse by Older Adults

- Cognitive and physical impairment leading to falls, motor vehicle accidents and inability to perform daily tasks
- Dependence and addiction (especially to opioids, anti-anxiety drugs and sleep medications)
- Respiratory depression and irregular heartbeat, which can be fatal
- Loss of motivation and withdrawal from family and friends

Preventing Prescription Drug Misuse by Older Adults

Older Adults should:

- Inform their health care providers about ALL medications and supplements they are taking
- Carefully follow medication instructions
- Not use other people’s medications

Health Care Providers should:

- Ask patients about ALL medications before prescribing
- Routinely screen for medication misuse
- Provide counseling and referrals as needed

Aging Services Networks should:

- Conduct information campaigns and educational programs to raise awareness of the issue

For more information:

- Medication Safety: A Toolkit for Families at www.learnaboutrxsafety.org
- Medication Use Safety Training for Seniors (MUST) National Council on Patient Information Education at www.mustforseniors.org
- Medline Plus: Prescription Drug Abuse at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/prescriptiondrugabuse.html>

Content Sources: SAMHSA/AoA Issue Brief: Prescription Medication Misuse and Abuse among Older Adults, 2012
NIDA Research Report: Prescription Drugs: Abuse and Addiction, 2011