



## Increase in Senior Citizens with Opioid Addiction

Over the past few years, there has been an increase in the number of opioid overdose deaths of adults over the age of 55, and the number of adults with substance use disorder over the age of 65 has grown substantially.

One of the reasons that older individuals are experiencing opioid addiction in greater numbers is due to an increase in chronic illnesses. Diseases like arthritis and cancer are often treated with opioid drugs, and the prevalence of these conditions increases with age.

Another reason for the upsurge in elder addiction and overdose is the greater injury risk due to falls and fractures that subjects this population group to medically prescribed opioids. Older adults typically use healthcare more often than younger adults and are therefore more likely to receive an opioid-based prescription.

Adding to the problem is the fact that aging decreases the body's ability to metabolize opiates, and declining cognitive function can contribute to taking more of a drug than prescribed resulting in overdose.

Senior citizens who experience isolation and depression as they age are more susceptible to substance use disorder. The present generation is already using drugs at higher rates than all previous generations and taking a pill to deal with the difficulties of life is commonplace.

All of these factors along with the overall aging of the American population has resulted in a recent increase

of more than 200% in emergency room visits for opioid misuse by those age 65 or older.

In the decade leading up to 2019, almost 80,000 Americans aged 55 years or older died because of an opioid overdose. The beginning of this increase in overdose deaths of older adults coincided with the increased availability of fentanyl, a powerful synthetic opioid.

## Opioid Abuse and Suicides Among the Elderly

While there is a higher risk of suicide within any group of people who abuse opioids, the prevalence in senior citizens is especially concerning. People who misuse their opioid painkiller prescriptions are 71% more likely to have suicidal thoughts and 95% more likely to have a plan to take their own life. They are also more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide.

Older adults already have some of the highest rates of suicide, and opioid use is a serious mitigating factor that substantially increases the risk.

## Dealing with the Problem

What can be done to decrease the number of senior citizen overdose deaths, suicides, and rates of opioid addiction in America?

Medical professionals must overcome the belief that older individuals do not develop substance use disorders, and older adults should be routinely screened by their physician for depression and unhealthy alcohol and drug use. Doctors must realize that natural declines in mental functioning in the process of aging could be masking substance use or

opioid use disorders, and that because of stigma senior citizens are more likely to try and hide their addiction problem.

Additional training is needed for physicians, nurses, and other healthcare workers on how to identify signs of substance use disorder in older adults and how to help them overcome the stigma and embarrassment they experience and enter treatment.

The good news is, once in treatment, older people are more successful in recovery compared to middle-aged and younger adults. The key is in identifying those in need and getting them the help they deserve.

***The following suicide prevention information, while provided by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, will also be helpful to those in states other than Georgia. Online resources listed are available to users nationwide.***

Many American adults were raised in a culture where alcohol use was glorified, and mental health and depression were stigmatized. Where taking a mental health day was unheard of and where a hard day's work deserved a cold beer or a filled-to-the-brim glass of wine. A cultural milieu where your first hangover was a rite of passage into an adulthood that self-prescribed a stiff drink to calm the nerves, ease social anxiety, and relax inhibitions. Where the idea of having a few drinks was baked into the very concept of celebration and relaxation by movies, music, and advertising of every form that often depict people laughing and having a good time while holding a beer, cocktail, or a glass of wine.

But living alongside this culture of socially acceptable alcohol consumption is a reality in which 15 million Americans suffer from alcohol abuse, a major risk factor for

developing major depressive disorder (which affects 17.3 million Americans) and suicide, which is currently the twelfth leading cause of death in the US. Despite these staggering statistics, few people discuss their struggles with which perpetuates the illusion cast by alcohol companies that drinking is a fun social activity enjoyed by most adults without issue. And for some adults, that is absolutely the case. However, a recent study by *Jama Psychiatry* revealed that one in eight American adults struggle with alcohol abuse.<sup>1</sup> Another study by the National Center for Health Statistics estimated that roughly one in twelve Americans have suffered from moderate to severe symptoms of depression. Additionally, a recent evaluation of the National Violent Death Reporting System found that 22 percent of people who died by suicide were drunk when they died—24 percent of men, and 17 percent of women.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Edwards AC, Ohlsson H, Sundquist J, Sundquist K, Kendler KS. Alcohol use disorder and risk of suicide in a Swedish population-based cohort. *AJP*. 2020;177(7):627-634. doi:10.1176/appi.ajp.2019.19070673

<sup>2</sup>Kaplan MS, McFarland BH, Huguet N, et al. Acute alcohol intoxication and suicide: a gender-stratified analysis of the National Violent Death Reporting System Injury Prevention 2013;19:38-43.

If you experience any thoughts about suicide, call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-8255**.

To learn more about suicide prevention, visit the DBHDD website at:  
<https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/suicide-prevention>.

Or contact the Suicide Prevention Director, Rachael Holloman, at:  
[rachael.holloman@dbhdd.ga.gov](mailto:rachael.holloman@dbhdd.ga.gov).

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:**  
1-800-273-TALK (8255).