

Supporting older adults with substance use challenges



What can I do as a caregiver or family member?

Many people believe that substance use disorders only occur in teens and younger adults. However, substance use disorders can affect anyone, including older adults. Substance use disorders among older adults may be overlooked for a number of reasons, including: ^{1,5}

- older adults are better able to hide their substance use, often using substances at home rather than in public
- older adults may not go to school or work, and therefore may be less affected by their substance use in other areas of their life
- signs of substance use disorder can be similar to other mental health challenges experienced by older adults, such as depression and dementia.
- families/caregivers of older adults may be aware of a potential substance use issue, but may not know how to appropriately address or talk about it.

What can you as a caregiver or family member do to help?

1. Understand the warning signs and impact of substance use.
2. Know what medication(s) your family member is taking.
3. Know when and how to talk about getting help.
4. Connect your family member with help.
5. Be willing to participate in therapy, if necessary.

The impact of substances on older adults

Older adults can experience certain social and physical changes that may increase their risk of developing substance use disorders. These changes include, but are not limited to:⁴

- Cognitive and functional decline that may make the aging brain more vulnerable to the effects of substances (e.g., language, perceptual speed, reasoning, memory etc. may be affected).
- The aging brain experiences many chemical changes. This can make the brain more sensitive to the effects of substances.
- Age-related changes to kidney and liver function can affect how the body absorbs, distributes and converts substances, as well as how it removes waste. This can mean that substances will be present in the body at higher concentrations for longer periods of time.
- Older adults tend to have more chronic health conditions and are often prescribed more medications. This may increase their risk for potentially harmful drug interactions.
- Older adults may be more at risk for mood disorders, lung and heart problems, or issues with memory. Using substances can make these conditions worse.⁷



Alcohol

The effects of alcohol are different in older adults: ^{1, 3, 5}



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For a summary of Canada's low-risk drinking guidelines for seniors, please visit: <https://ccsmh.ca/substance-use-addiction/alcohol-guidelines>

Prescription medications

Older adults are often prescribed medications for various chronic health conditions, which can sometimes lead to the misuse of medications. Some examples include:^{1, 5}



- not taking medication as prescribed (e.g., taking more than needed, not taking enough or skipping doses)
- using expired medication or using someone else's medication
- taking medication to feel good or "high" (occurs more frequently with medications used to treat depression, anxiety or chronic pain)
- mixing prescription medications with alcohol.

It's important to know what medication(s) your family member is taking to help them manage proper use of medications, as well as being able to identify potentially dangerous drug interactions.

Substance use risk and protective factors in older adults

The following lists outline the various protective and risk factors related to substance use in older adults:⁸

Protective factors

- Resilience
- Positive self-image, identity and purpose
- Ability to live alone
- Married or in a committed relationship
- Supportive relationships with family and friends
- Retirement (when voluntary)
- Access to basic needs (e.g., safe housing)
- Appropriate medical care and proper use of medications

Risk factors

- Involuntary retirement
- Bereavement (e.g., death of spouse, family or friends)
- Transitions in care/living situations
- Married or in a committed relationship
- Chronic physical health conditions (e.g., pain, high blood pressure, sleep, mobility issues)
- Past or present trauma
- Past or present mental illness
- Cognitive decline (e.g., dementia)
- Social isolation (e.g., less active, disconnected from friends or family)
- Financial strain
- Past, present or family history of substance use disorder
- Ease of access to substances and social acceptance of substance use

Warning signs of substance use disorder in older adults

Warning signs of potential substance use disorder in older adults can include behavioural, cognitive, mental health and/or social symptoms. If you notice any of these signs, it is best to speak with a healthcare provider because many of these signs can also be related to other health issues. Potential signs and indicators of substance use disorder in older adults include:^{6,8}



Behavioural

- Increase in falls, bruises or burns
- Poor hygiene/self-care
- Headaches, dizziness
- Incontinence
- Increased tolerance/unusual response to alcohol or medications
- Poor nutrition or changes in eating habits
- Blackouts
- Chronic pain

Cognitive

- Feeling disoriented
- Issues with memory
- Having a hard time focusing or making decisions
- Overall cognitive impairment

Mental health

- Sleep disturbances, problems, or insomnia
- Feeling anxious
- Low or depressed mood
- Loss of interest in usual activities

Social

- Family problems
- Financial problems
- Legal problems
- Social isolation
- Running out of medication early
- Borrowing medication from others

Know when and how to talk about getting help

Talking to a family member about their substance use takes patience and compassion. If you approach a family member and accuse them of having an issue with their substance use (e.g., “You have a problem” or “You drink too much”), they will likely deny having an issue and refuse to continue talking about it.

When confronting someone about their substance use, it is important to take a person-centered approach. This means putting “the person” before “the problem.”

Some tips include:^{2, 8}

- Avoid having this conversation when your family member is intoxicated or under the influence.
- Describe what you see by using “I statements” that show your feelings and concern. Avoid “You statements” that criticize or blame your family member (e.g., “I worry that you may have another bad fall if you don’t reduce your drinking” instead of “You drink so much that you keep falling down!”). Transitions in care/living situations
Married or in a committed relationship
- Avoid using guilt, threats or bribes to force your family member into stopping or reducing their substance use.
- Avoid using stigmatizing language like “alcoholic” or “addict.”
- Try to focus on your family member’s strengths over their weaknesses. Remind them how their substance use may affect their personal values, relationships or favourite activities.
- Encourage your family member to attend activities they enjoy that do not involve substance use.
- Offer your support and/or assistance with getting help. For example, you can offer to drive them to their appointments or attend therapy sessions if they wish.



Resources for getting help

For mental health and substance use services in Ontario, please visit the Connex Ontario website www.connexontario.ca.

- Click “Find Services in Your Area.”
- In the “Advanced Search” option, under “Service,” select the drop-down menu under “Service Targeted to” and select “Older Adults.”
- Services listed for older adults generally include individuals 65 years and older, though some services are available for individuals as young as 55.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) has a comprehensive list of available services for older adults, which is available on their website: www.camh.ca/-/media/files/community-resource-sheets/older-adults-resources-pdf.pdf

Additionally, you may speak with your health care provider or family physician for their recommendations.

Additional resources

- For more information on how to cope and relate effectively with the family member who has a substance use problem, please check out the Families CARE book. <https://store-camh.myshopify.com/products/pm081>
- For more information on mental health resources in multiple languages please visit, Multi-Cultural Mental Health Resource Centre <https://multiculturalmentalhealth.ca>

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