

Prescription and illicit drug abuse is timely new topic on NIHSeniorHealth.gov

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(Medical Xpress) -- Data from national surveys reveal a disturbing trend for 50- to 59-year-olds: the number of those reporting past-month abuse of illicit drugs — including the nonmedical use of prescription drugs — more than doubled from 2002 to 2010, going from 907,000 to 2,375,000, or from 2.7 to 5.8 percent in this population. Among those 65 and older, 414,000 used illicit drugs in 2010. A new topic, Prescription and Illicit Drug Abuse, available on NIHSeniorHealth.gov, describes this trend and the effects of medication and drug abuse on older adults.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) at the National Institutes of Health, the numbers of older substance abusers could continue to rise, due to the aging of the baby boomers, who were more likely than previous generations to have used [illicit drugs](#) in their youth.

Medications for a variety of conditions can help older adults maintain health and function, and most older adults take their medications as prescribed. At the same time, abuse of prescription medications — such as painkillers and depressants — and illicit drugs — such as marijuana and cocaine — can be especially harmful for older adults because aging changes how the body and brain handle these substances. "As people get older, it is more difficult for their bodies to absorb and break down medications and drugs," says Dr. Nora Volkow, director of NIDA. "Abusing these substances can worsen age-related health conditions, cause injuries and lead to addiction."

Although substance abuse among older adults is preventable and treatable, many older adults may not get the help they need because some common warning signs of abuse, such as sleep problems, falls, and depression, can also be signs of other health conditions. The new topic on NIHSeniorHealth provides tips on behaviors to watch for and appropriate steps to take if a substance abuse problem is suspected. "This topic is an excellent, easy-to-understand overview of a growing problem," says Dr. Volkow. "It's a must-read for anyone concerned about [substance abuse](#) in themselves, an older relative or friend."

Prescription and Illicit [Drug Abuse](#) is the latest topic to appear on NIHSeniorHealth, joining a roster of nearly 60 research-based health topics of interest to older adults, including exercise and physical activity, safe use of medicines and management of diseases such as stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis and Alzheimer's disease. A joint effort of the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine at NIH, NIHSeniorHealth has senior-friendly features such as large print and opened-captioned videos to make the information on the site easy for older adults to see, understand and navigate. Recently redesigned for today's [older adults](#), NIHSeniorHealth now features a search function that offers users access to an even broader selection of senior-related [health](#) information.

More information: nihseniorhealth.gov/

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