

# Aging Baby Boomers keep on using... bringing substance abuse, and treatment, into old age

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The rate at which older adults were treated for substance abuse increased sharply from 2000 to 2017, UConn Health researchers report in the March 28 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*. The rates of older

adults getting treatment increased substantially while the rate of younger adults remained stable over time.

The Baby Boom generation born from 1946 to 1964 has had consistently high rates of substance use. As members of this generation enter older adulthood, the numbers of older adults seeking treatment for [substance abuse](#) has also increased. According to data from the Treatment Episode Dataset, a nationwide compilation of services used, available from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the rate of people aged 55 or over getting treatment for substance use increased from 8.8 per 1,000 people in 2000 to 15.1 per 1,000 people in 2017. The increase was almost entirely due to treatment for cannabis and cocaine use; alcohol-related treatment rates stayed about the same over time.

Although the data does not include information that would explain the increase, the researchers have hypotheses. The first is that the Baby Boomers began transitioning to older adulthood from 2001-2017, and their higher rates of substance use followed them.

The researchers also suspect that currently there is less stigma attached to substance abuse than there was in the past, and so people, including older adults, are more likely to seek help. This theory is buttressed by SAMHSA data showing that the increase in substance [treatment](#) was mostly due to self-referrals, not forced referrals from the criminal justice system.

"I am primarily interested in whether people are getting the correct care for substance abuse. I also have a special interest in gerontology," says T. Greg Rhee, a UConn School of Medicine psychiatric epidemiologist and the senior author of the study. From Rhee's point of view, the SAMHSA [data](#) aren't necessarily bad. Self-referrals mean older adults are recognizing when they need help.

"The population of [older adults](#) in the US is growing, and so is the number who use cocaine and cannabis. We really need to think about how to best address this," Rhee says.

**More information:** Increased Admissions of Older Adults to Substance Use Treatment Facilities and Associated Changes in Admission Characteristics, 2000-2017, *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* (2022).

Provided by University of Connecticut

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