

Opioid Addiction and Older Adults

A [growing number of older](#) Americans are becoming addicted to prescription opioid drugs like OxyContin and Vicodin. While drug-related deaths have increased dramatically in all age groups, [the greatest percentage increase has been among adults ages 55 to 64](#).

Why are older adults misusing opioids?

As people approach retirement, various life changes can lead to an increase in prescription drug abuse. These life changes – like divorce, an empty nest, or the loss of a parent or a spouse – may lead a person to feel more socially isolated and turn to addictive substances as a means to self-medicate difficult feelings and emotions. Retirement also can prompt anxiety and stress. As older individuals approach these transitional life events, it is important for family members to be actively aware of any [changes in their behavior](#) that may reflect opioid misuse.

Another factor that contributes to the use, misuse of and possible addiction to opioids and other addictive medications in older adults is the accessibility of these drugs. Older adults have an increased likelihood of experiencing pain and physical illness and are prescribed pain relievers more frequently than younger people.

Chronic and persistent pain is often managed with strong opioid medications like OxyContin, Percocet, or Vicodin, and it is common for [health care professionals to overlook](#) the potential for addiction in their older patients. Although there are [various strategies](#) to managing pain in older adults that do not involve prescription opioids, opioids [still tend to be over-prescribed](#) in this age group.

As we age, [physiological changes](#) occur and we metabolize alcohol and drugs at a slower rate. As such, an older individual will experience their effects more intensely and for a longer period of time than younger people. Older patients are likely to be prescribed multiple pain relievers which increases the severity of the [side effects](#) caused by opioids. Hence, they are at increased risk of developing addiction after a shorter period of time than younger people.

What is being done to help?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently published [12 recommendations for opioid prescribing](#). The hope is that health care professionals will exercise caution when prescribing strong pain relievers and recognize the signs of prescription drug misuse and addiction in their older patients. By spreading awareness of the dangers of opioid addiction and considering safer pain management options, the number of older adults suffering from addiction will hopefully decrease.

For older adults who are concerned about their prescription drug use, or families concerned about an older relative's use of prescription drugs, [treatments](#) for opioid addiction that are effective in younger people are just as effective for people later in life.

These [treatments](#) include medication-assisted treatment, which is medication coupled with counseling and residential and outpatient services that serve this demographic. You can find more information about treatment in our [Guide to Finding Quality Addiction Treatment](#).

SOURCE: [National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse](#)