Addiction in Older Adults
Why It’s Prevalent. What Can Be Done.

Addiction in older adults is an enormous and growing problem. Treating this population requires special insights and approaches. This Q&A addresses some of the common issues unique to older adults.

1. Why the spike in addiction in older adults?

Addiction is a major problem in the 55-plus age bracket for several reasons:

- The growing number of addicted older adults is due partly to the fact that there is a growing number of older adults. Every day for the next two decades, 10,000 baby boomers will turn 65.
- Many of these boomers grew up experimenting with drugs, so it’s possible that, as they move into retirement and face the stresses inherent in this new phase of life, some will cope by using alcohol and other drugs.
- This generation is highly self-reliant. When facing the physical pains of aging, rather than ask for help, people may turn to prescription drugs, many of which have a high potential for misuse and dependence.
- As people age they may have more free time and possible isolation. Older adults can progress in their addiction without witnesses who might otherwise voice concerns (such as bosses or local family members).
- Older adults can become forgetful. At times they may forget they have taken their pills and then take them again or mix them with alcohol, which can lead to what we call “accidental addicts.” Without intending to abuse their chemicals, older adults may suddenly realize that they have crossed the line.

2. Do older adults face different addiction issues as they continue to age?

More important than chronological age is level of health and independence. But in general we divide the older adult population into two groups: ages 55–75 and 75 and older. Adults ages 55–75, who came of age during the Vietnam War era, may have experimented with drugs when younger and may more easily go back to drugs as they age and have fewer responsibilities. Older adults ages 75 and above are of a generation that associates huge moral implications and shame with addiction, and they may hide their addiction.

3. What stresses can lead to addiction in older adults?

In 63 percent of older adult addiction cases, depression and anxiety play a leading role. In about 30 percent of cases, financial worries are a contributing factor. Emotional and physical pain can also be a precipitating factor. Transitions to retirement are tough. High-performing, active people suddenly find themselves without a sense of purpose. Their children are independent. Their physical abilities start to lessen. Some medicate this pain. More free time and less responsibility can also make people vulnerable to addiction.
4. How does addiction in aging men differ from addiction in aging women?

Men and women start using alcohol and other drugs for different reasons. Although a generalization, men are more likely to become addicted to alcohol, and women are more likely to become addicted to pills combined with alcohol. Both may be hesitant to seek treatment—men because they often view therapy as a weakness and women because of the stigma and shame around addiction. Women metabolize alcohol and other drugs differently than men and are more affected physiologically. Because of these disparities, men and women benefit from experiencing different approaches to treatment and recovery. It is vital that individuals find a treatment program that addresses gender-specific issues.

5. Is treatment different for older adults than for younger adults?

Absolutely. Older adults need a longer detox period and more individually paced treatment time. A key element in any treatment program is connecting with peers. It may be difficult for an older adult to open up when sitting next to a 25-year-old, for example, in a treatment group.

6. Do children of addicted older adults have difficulty helping?

Yes. In many cases, children live at a distance and don’t see the problem. They may also unknowingly enable the addiction by believing in myths: “He isn’t harming anyone,” or “She should be allowed to enjoy her golden years.”

7. Are sobriety success rates different for older adults?

Recovery rates tend to be higher in older adults than in younger people because older adults have more positive life experiences to draw upon and tend to be more disciplined about recovery.

Addiction is a lifelong disease.  
Make the call of a lifetime.