

Substance Use in Older Adults

This handout accompanies the [online module](#) for crisis call centers from the E4 Center on this topic



Older adults can be very complex, and it can be difficult to figure out what the person is experiencing. If the older adult you're speaking to is speaking abnormally or appears confused, it could be due to substance use, dementia, delirium, psychosis, depression, heart attack, stroke... the list goes on. Consult with your supervisor and consider whether it's appropriate to request an in-person safety check.



Key Facts

- The physical changes normal aging causes in the body and brain can lead to a greater sensitivity to drugs as well as a greater level of intoxication and impairment for older adults.
- Older adults are at greater risk from accidents and injuries due to the impact of substance use on judgment, coordination, and reaction time.
- Alcohol is the most commonly used substance for those age 65 and older—and older adults are more likely to be taking medications that interact badly with alcohol.
- Substance use can increase suicidal risk behavior in people of all ages.

Practical Strategies

- **Check in with yourself.** Most people have feelings about substance use or believe some myths about aging and substance use.
- **Verify your assumptions.** If you believe an older adult is drinking or misusing substances, seek to understand how to help and what resources to provide.
- **Keep it neutral.** Remain nonjudgmental when asking about substance use. Pay attention to your feelings as they may impact the tone of your conversation.
- **Reassure and reinforce.** Build the relationship with the caller by letting them know how difficult it can be to talk about problems and ask for help.

Suggestions for What to Ask and Say

When talking with an older adult who may have substance use concerns, gain an understanding of their life stressors or big changes in life.

EXAMPLE: *There are so many things in life that can cause stress for us. I am wondering if you have had any recent changes in your life.*

- *Have you retired or changed your job recently?*
- *How are your finances? Can you make ends meet?*
- *Any changes in your living situation? Like where you live or who you live with?*
- *What is a typical day for you?*
- *Are dealing with any health problems that are causing you concern or worry?*

Ask directly about substance use in a non-judgmental way.

EXAMPLE: *I understand you are under stress and are struggling. Sometimes when people are under stress, their alcohol use increases which leads to more problems.*

Provide education about risk and evaluate their behavior related to suicide risk.

EXAMPLE: *[remember to ask one question at a time!] Can you tell me about how much you drink on any given day? What about days that are particularly stressful? Do you ever find yourself drinking more than usual when you are stressed? [this is a good time to provide information about safe drinking and binge drinking] It is also important to know that drinking may interact with other medications you are taking. Do you take any medication?*

This might a good time to provide information about how medication plus alcohol can increase falls, cognitive problems, and risks to life.

EXAMPLE: *What about substances or medications other than alcohol? You mentioned some prescriptions for [pain? anxiety?]. Sometimes people take more medication or take them at times that are different than prescribed to deal with stress. Do you ever use prescriptions to help with stress in that way?*

This might be a good time to provide information on the risks of interactions, overdose, or addiction to prescription medication.

EXAMPLE: *Many people feel that it is “safer” to use prescription medications to relieve stress in this way. However, there are just as many risks of overdose or addiction with some prescription medications as with non-prescription drugs.*

Encourage changes to alcohol and drug use and reinforce that treatment can be helpful.

EXAMPLE: *Thank you for being so open with me about your stress and how you are coping. I know it is sometimes a really difficult thing to talk about—but the information you gave me really helps me to help you. There are effective treatments available that can help you manage stress and substance use – these treatments can increase quality of life and improve relationships.*

Learn More:

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Association \(SAMHSA\)](#) provides information for clinicians, other service providers, older adults, and caregivers: Narcotics Anonymous is a global organization that provides information helps those trying to overcome drug or alcohol dependence using their twelve-step program.

[Alcoholics Anonymous](#) provides support for individuals with a drinking problem through their twelve-step program.

General information from the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#).

[2019 Edition of a toolkit related to substance misuse and mental illness in older adults](#) as well as educational material for older adults.

