

Drug Abuse Among seniors

By Kate McCarthy

The idea of Grandma or Grandpa being a drug addict sounds absurd, yet across the country there is rising concern over senior drug abuse. Baby boomers, many who grew up thinking of casual drug use as a life style choice, now have reached a stage where the use of drugs has become an addiction. Scores of senior citizens are hooked. According to a new study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) there are approximately 4.3 million seniors using illegal drugs. Close to 5% of the older adult population are quietly using illegal and prescription drugs in dangerous ways and it is expected that number will increase by 150% by the year 2020.

The Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN), an agency which monitors cases of medication and illegal drug usage reported in hospital emergency rooms across the nation, states that the most common prescription drugs being abused by seniors are benzodiazepines found in Valium, Xanax, Klonopin, and Ativan. Opiates are also popular and are found in Percocet, Vicodin, and Lortab. Morphine and methadone are also being abused. Some seniors use a single drug but in most cases a combination of prescriptions are taken and may be mixed with marijuana and/or alcohol.

There are many reasons why older adults are becoming addicted to drugs. In many cases, the common aches and pains of aging cause seniors to turn to prescription pain killer which work so well that the user becomes physically dependant on them. Another common reason for turning to drugs is depression. Loneliness, boredom, and anxiety caused by retirement, separation from family and friends, death of a loved one, inability to sleep or concerns over failing health all have been linked to seniors and drug addiction. Whether the addiction has unintentionally evolved through the mixing of multiple medications or is intentional abuse of prescription medications, marijuana and alcohol, the end result is dangerous and can be deadly.

Once hooked the older drug abuser will find clever ways to repeatedly refill their prescription to feed their addiction. Busy doctors do not always carefully track what prescriptions have been given to a patient, so a clever senior is able to visit several physicians and specialists to get a continuous supply of legitimate prescriptions for their drugs of choice.

Some might be tempted to excuse addiction to pain killers and prescription medications as harmless, after all most elderly do experience some level of chronic pain. The problem is that the combination of prescription with over the counter medications can put seniors in danger. Mixing drugs and alcohol will slow the flow of blood causing lower blood pressure, dizziness, confusion, heart rhythm irregularities. The results are falls, fractures, internal damage and even accidental overdosing. In addition, weakened immune systems due to drug addiction make senior addicts especially vulnerable to viruses.

How can you tell if an older adult is abusing drugs? The signs are different than drug abuse among teens or adults. The national Center for Substance Abuse Treatment lists warning signs that indicate possible substance abuse in seniors.

- Trouble with memory after taking a drink or medication
- Frequent falls due to loss of coordination
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Unexplained bruises
- Lack of confidence
- Irritability, sadness and depression
- Continuous complaints of chronic pain
- Changes in eating habits
- Desire to be alone
- Failing to shower or bathe
- Difficulty with concentration
- Unwillingness to contact family or friends
- Lack of interest in normal activities

Finding help for an elderly loved one struggling with a drug problem is a delicate issue and needs to be handled with tact and sympathy. Suggesting a medication screening test is often the best approach as it allows medical professionals to intervene without finger pointing or blame.

Once the problem is identified, success for beating an addiction is generally better with seniors than with younger drug abusers. Most seniors feel ashamed of their secret addictions and welcome help. Yet, for the elderly, withdrawal from long term use of drugs can be just as dangerous as the addiction itself and needs to be carefully supervised by a professional.

There is an excellent source of information and help tailored just for seniors battling drug addiction located in the Fox Valley. The Lutheran Social Service offers an outpatient treatment program called Side-By-Side. Located at the Thompson Community Center at 820 W. College Avenue, the program provides substance abuse outpatient treatment for seniors 55 years or older. For more information call Becky Green at (920) 225-1713.

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