Older Adults and Substance Use

Why is this an important issue?

Although older people are less likely than younger people to use substances, the consequences can be great.

- The impacts of alcohol and other drugs on the body increase with age and it takes more time for the body to process these substances.
- Older people are more likely to have health conditions that can be negatively affected by alcohol and other drugs.
- Older people are more likely to use prescription drugs for medical conditions which increase the risk for substance interactions.
- Substance use is associated with greater risk for elder abuse, self-neglect, and financial exploitation.
- Data on substance use and older people is limited, particularly at the local level.

What is happening throughout the U.S.?

- 9.3% of adults 50 and older and 6.3% of adults 65 and older reported a substance use disorder.*
- 45.3% of adults 65 and older reported current alcohol use, 1 in 10 reported binge drinking, and 3.4% reported heavy alcohol use.*
- The Monitoring the Future study found that frequent alcohol use increased with age as 14.2% of adults 60 and older reported daily use.**
- 2% of adults 65 and older reported misuse of opioids in the past year.*
- Over 2.5 million adults 65 and older (4.7%) reported using an illicit drug in the past year.*

What is happening in Delaware?

According to the 2021 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System data on Delaware adults 65 and over:

- Nearly half reported alcohol use in the past month
- 6.6% reported binge drinking (5 or more drinks for males/4 for females on one occasion)
- 4.6% reported heavy drinking (14 drinks per week for males/7 for females)

In 2021, there were 64 overdose deaths in Delaware among people over the age of 60. (Delaware Division of Forensic Science, 2022)

Older Adults and Mental Health

Data from the 2020 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*

More than 1 in 10 adults 65 and older in the U.S. reported having any type of mental illness the previous year. 2% reported experiencing a serious mental illness.

Depression can occur at any age. Illness and chronic medical conditions, having a disability, personal losses, and grief -- which may be more common to experience as we age -- can contribute to risk for depression.

Approximately 1 in 20 adults aged 50 and over surveyed recently experienced a major depressive episode the previous year. 3.8% of adults 65 and over also experienced a major depressive episode. Rates are much higher for females.

Among adults 50 and over:
- Over 3 million had serious thoughts of suicide
- more than half a million made a suicide plan,
- 124,000 attempted suicide

9.4% of adults aged 65 and over in Delaware reported that they had ever been told they had a form of depression.

6.5% of Delawareans aged 65 and over experienced frequent mental distress, the lowest rate reported among all age groups in Delaware in 2020. The rates of death by suicide increase with age among older people:

- 65 and older: 12.7 per 100,000 population
- age 65-74: 10.6 per 100,000
- age 75-84: 13.8 per 100,000
- 85 and older: 20.7 per 100,000

To Learn More...

National Institutes of Mental Health
- Older Adults and Mental Health
- Mental Health and Older Adults Factbook Live Q&A

To Find Help and Services...

Delaware Aging & Disabilities Resources Center
www.DelawareADRC.com
1-800-223-9074

988 Suicide and Crisis Lifelines
Delaware Hope Line
833-9-HOPEDE
Help Is Here
https://www.helpisherede.com/

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