

Addiction Services

Community Health Services

(519) 383-8331

Lambton County Addiction Services

(519) 464-4400 ext:5370

Kent County Addiction Services

(519) 436-2599

Ontario Drug Rehab Centers

1-877-801-5475

Sarnia-Lambton Drug Strategy

Seniors & Substance Abuse
Knowledge is the Best Medicine



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Why Seniors Turn to Drugs and Alcohol

There are a number of reasons why someone over the age of 65 might begin to use drugs and alcohol on a consistent basis even if they've never struggled with addiction in their lives. These may include any combination of the following:

- Loss of a spouse and/or good friends
- Financial problems
- Access to addictive prescription drugs
- Low self esteem
- Loneliness
- Retirement boredom

All of these issues can affect any of us at any age, but for those who are older and feel that they are suddenly losing control of their lives, these issues can be particularly depressing if not devastating. Age limits options and it's difficult to start again when a relationship ends, to rebuild finances, to fight off the loneliness and boredom that can come with retirement.

Age also brings health problems and with health problems comes pain and with pain comes... prescription painkillers. Highly addictive and a problem across every age group, prescription painkillers often look like a good way to drown out difficult emotions. Continued access means that [prescription painkiller addiction](#) is often the result for seniors.

Seniors and Drugs

Seniors suffer from more diseases and conditions than other age groups, due largely to the normal consequence of aging. Seniors are the largest consumers of medications. Seniors :-

- Fill an average of 15 prescriptions per year
- May take up to 10 different medications at one time
- Buy various over-the-counter drugs; and account for more than one third of all adverse drug reaction reports made to Health Canada and for 44% of all reported adverse drug reactions suspected of causing death.

Here's a look at the prescriptions that most often cause trouble:

Barbiturates. These sedatives, often prescribed to treat insomnia, are particularly potent for seniors. Older bodies break down and eliminate the drugs slowly. Also, these drugs tend to be distributed in body fat, which tends to increase with advancing age; the stored drug is released gradually, prolonging the effects of the medication. The risk of addiction -- not to mention the risk of falls and broken bones -- is so great that no senior citizen should take the drug on a regular basis, experts say. If you suffer from insomnia, try nondrug treatments such as relaxation therapy, or ask your doctor about sedatives with less potential for addiction.

Diazepam (Valium), chlordiazepoxide (Librium), and similar sedatives. These "long half-life" sedatives, often prescribed to treat insomnia and anxiety, are designed to work slowly and linger in the blood. As with barbiturates, these drugs can accumulate in the body fat of seniors, carry a large risk of addiction, and increase the risk of falls. For this reason, experts in geriatric medicine say long half-life drugs should never be prescribed to people over 65. Unfortunately, many doctors haven't received the message; diazepam (Valium) alone is prescribed to roughly 100,000 seniors each year.

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Morphine and other narcotics. These powerful pain-killers can definitely cause addiction, but pain experts say that for most people the benefits outweigh the risks. In studies of almost 25,000 chronic pain patients with no history of drug abuse, only seven patients became addicted to the painkillers. (The drugs are not recommended, however, for people with previous addictions). Other studies have repeatedly found that this class of drugs is safe and effective for relieving chronic pain, especially cancer pain. Despite results such as these, the stigma surrounding narcotic painkillers is so strong that many doctors still refuse to prescribe them.

Your Medications:

Some Important Questions to Ask

- What are benefits and risks of taking this medication? How addictive is this medication?
- Might I experience any side-effects or reactions to this medication? If so, what are they? What should I do if I develop a side-effect or reaction?
- Are there specific foods or beverages I should or should not take with my medication? Specifically ask, "Can I drink alcohol with this medication?"
- What should I do if I miss a dose of this medicine?

Seniors and Alcohol

Alcohol has greater effect on seniors because metabolism changes as we age. Older people are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol, and a little will go a long way. Seniors generally take more medications than other adults.

Mixing alcohol with either prescription or over the counter drugs is unwise and can be dangerous.

Alcohol problems among older persons are often mistaken for physical, social or emotional conditions associated with aging.

The abuse or misuse of alcohol may go undetected or may be treated inappropriately.

For some seniors lack of day to day contact with fellow workers, families, and neighbours can make it difficult for others to detect an alcohol problem if one exists. Moreover, a lot of seniors may be unwilling to admit to a drinking problem or uncomfortable seeking help.

Young or old, it is important to ask for help when needed. Information and treatment services are available. We can choose healthier alternatives to alcohol use - exercise, a second career, hobbies, or professional counseling to help deal with grief and loneliness.

Seniors & Smoking

Smoking is the number one preventable cause of death and disease in Canada. For those over 65, it contributes to eight of the top 14 causes of death. Smoking is also linked to the development of cataracts, sleep disturbance and osteoporosis, and can severely worsen illnesses and conditions such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, respiratory disease, and circulatory and vascular conditions.

The cost to one's health should be incentive enough to quit smoking. Smoking one pack of cigarettes a day at \$10.60 will cost you \$3,869.00 this year and likely more next year.

Despite the high cost and negative consequences of smoking, the habit is hard to break.

Half of seniors who smoke daily still consume an average of 15 cigarettes a day and have been doing so for more than 50 years.

For all smokers, including seniors, the good news is that quitting is a no-fail prescription for better health and quality of life:

- Within eight hours of quitting - the blood oxygen level increases to normal.
- Within a year, the risk of a smoking-related heart attack is cut in half. In addition, kicking tobacco dependence is a great boost to self-esteem.

Strategies For Safe Medication Use

- Ensure that your doctor & pharmacist are aware of all the drugs that you are taking.
- Take your medicine exactly as directed on the label. Too much or too little of your medicine could be harmful.
- If you forget to take your medicine, don't double the next dose. Ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- Don't share your medicine with others or use medicine not prescribed for you.
- Finish all of your medicines unless your doctor tells you to not to.
- Don't save a prescription for future use unless your doctor tells you to.
- When certain medicines are mixed with alcohol, the result can be harmful. Ask your doctor or pharmacist. Ask about effects of even a small amount of alcohol on your medications.
- Check expiry dates. Don't use outdated medicines.
- Keep your medicine in a cool dry place, out of sunlight.
- Some medicines are stored in the refrigerator, while others are kept at room temperature. Ask your pharmacist.
- Don't keep your medicines in the bathroom. The heat & moisture can damage your medicine.
- Don't hoard medicines, unless they are part of your family First Aid Kit.
- Store your meds in its original container.
- Keep all medicines, including seemingly harmless medications like cough bottles, safely locked away and out of reach of children.
- Learn as much as possible about any medicines you take. The more you know about your medicine, the more you become a team player in your own health care.
- Remember, if you are not sure, **ASK!!!!**Your doctor and your pharmacist are the experts on your medicines.

Other Suggestions

Make a list of all your medicines (including doses) as well as your dietary supplements and herbal preparations. Keep the list updated and carry it with you. For each medicine list:

1. The name of the medicine
2. The amount that you take (1 tablet 400mg)
3. The time that you take it(morning)
4. The reason for taking the medicine (arthritis)

Remind your doctor or pharmacist about any previous conditions that might affect your ability to take certain medicines, such as allergies, a stroke, hypertension, serious heart disease, etc.

Don't be afraid to ask questions if you don't know the meaning of a word, if instructions are unclear, or if you want more information.

Whenever possible, have your doctor or a member of the medical staff give you written advice or instructions.

"The greatest wealth is health" - Virgil

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