



SUBSTANCE USE AND OLDER ADULTS

CHAPTER 7: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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Central to the future of knowledge about substance use, abuse, and dependence among older populations are questions about the relationships between substance use, chronological age, and cohort effects. In past decades, epidemiological studies have consistently shown that older people use alcohol and drugs less often and have fewer substance-related problems than do younger cohorts. Past epidemiological studies have also consistently demonstrated that older adults tend to decrease their use of alcohol with age, usually in response to poor health or changing social circumstances. Epidemiological research has documented that a segment of the older population does experience substance-related problems and disorders. Soon the increased size of this segment of older adults, resulting from the entry of the “baby boomers” into this age bracket, will increase the need for substance abuse assessment and treatment services even if prevalence rates remain constant in future older cohorts. Epidemiological research has also indicated that the “baby boom” cohort has used alcohol and other substances, especially marijuana, at higher rates than previous age cohorts, so there is reason to believe the potential exists for changes in the prevalence and incidence rates of substance use and substance-related disorders among future older cohorts.

Large, community-based data sets that include older age groups, such as Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) and the National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC), provide exciting opportunities to understand longitudinal changes in older adults’ alcohol and other drug use. Analysis of these data should focus on the differences between and similarities among age groups of older adults as well as on comparisons between older and younger adults. The growing literature on the complex relationships between alcohol use and beneficial health effects as well as on the relationships between alcohol use and health problems indicates that this is a rich area for future research. Some of the questions raised by the research include:

- ◆ To what extent will age-related changes in physical health determine alcohol and/or tobacco use and misuse among healthy older adults?

- ◆ To what extent will age-related changes in physical health determine use of over-the-counter drugs and herbal remedies among healthy older adults?
- ◆ To what extent will age-related changes in physical health determine other drug use, especially recreational use of marijuana or use of other illicit drugs, among older adults?
- ◆ How will social factors, such as widowhood, economic trends, and retirement practices affect substance use among future cohorts of older adults?
- ◆ How will minority group status affect prevalence of substance use in older cohorts?
- ◆ What, if any, are the relationships between sexual and racial/ethnic identity group status and use of particular types of substances?
- ◆ What are the relationships between drinking limits and physical and psychosocial health in samples of community-dwelling older people?
- ◆ What is the relationship between chronic pain and substance use and misuse among older adults both in the community and in health care facilities?
- ◆ What is the relationship between direct to consumer advertising of abusable prescription medications and prevalence of prescription drug abuse among older adults?

Screening and assessment of substance use and substance-related problems present many opportunities for continued research. The literature has provided some clear evidence about the types of problems and issues most often associated with substance use. However, there are differences in the sensitivity and specificity of various screening tools across settings and populations. With changes in prevalence of substance use in future cohorts, practitioners will need to understand elements of social desirability and social stigma associated with various types of substance use across the range of older age groups. There is also a need to understand gender differences and differences among racial/ethnic and other cultural groups. Some of the research questions include the following:

- ◆ What are the differences and similarities in the barriers affecting detection of substance use and abuse among older cohorts?
- ◆ Which screening tools demonstrate acceptable levels of sensitivity and specificity in different populations of older people?
- ◆ Are there differences in levels of social desirability and social stigma in alcohol and drug use between older age cohorts? Are there differences in levels of social desirability and social stigma in alcohol and other drug use

between older racial/ethnic, gender, and other groups? What is the relationship between social desirability, social stigma, and self report of alcohol and other drug use and abuse?

- ◆ How will future older cohorts' attitudes about alcohol be related to decisions about alcohol use?
- ◆ Will the future cohorts of older adults experience the same types of alcohol- or other drug-related problems as current cohorts of older adults?
- ◆ What factors will determine older adults' decisions to increase or decrease alcohol and/or other drug use? How will these factors be associated with age-related physical, social, or psychological changes?
- ◆ What types of motivational strategies will be effective with future cohorts of older adults in both assessment and referral to treatment for alcohol and other drug problems?
- ◆ How can screening and assessment methods be improved for older adults with cognitive impairments and psychiatric illness?

Research in treatment approaches and outcomes has progressed over the past 10 years but many questions remain concerning treatment engagement strategies, elements of effective programming, and treatment outcomes for older adults. Elder-specific programming has been shown effective in some studies, but it is unclear which components of the treatment account for the positive changes in alcohol consumption.

- ◆ What are the interactions between age group and type of treatment?
- ◆ What are the interactions between age group, drug of choice, and type of treatment?
- ◆ Most treatment efforts with older adults have focused on alcohol exclusively. Will these same treatment approaches yield effective results with older adults who are more likely to use other drugs like marijuana and cocaine or prescription drugs?
- ◆ What are the interactions between age group, gender, and minority group status, type of treatment, and treatment outcomes?

Which treatment engagement and treatment approaches will yield effective results with older women and members of ethnic/racial minorities and other minority groups?

Which treatment engagement and treatment approaches will yield effective results with older lesbian and gay people?

Curriculum Resources

Web Resources: Annotated List of Key Web Sites



The following list of Web sites are outstanding resources for obtaining updated information about both research and curriculum resources related to older adults and substance abuse.

American Society on Aging (ASA) <http://www.asaging.org/index.cfm>

According to the Web site, the ASA is the largest organization of multidisciplinary professionals in the field of aging. Their resources, publications, and educational opportunities are geared to enhance the knowledge and skills of people working with older adults and their families. The Web site provides numerous links to conferences, publications, and resources, and also focuses on diversity initiatives. This is an essential clearinghouse of information for those working with older adults.

American Society on Aging (ASA) – Alcohol, Medication, and Other Drugs (AOD)
<http://www.asaging.org/asav2/aod/index.cfm>

The Web site provides links to free trainings and technical assistance on alcohol problems and medication misuse among older adults. The resources are particularly targeted for AOD and other community-based providers seeking information and resources to better serve older adults. Included in this Web site are links to facts, resources, Web-based trainings, and an “Ask the Experts” section. Additionally, this Web site provides updated information about other useful Web sites and resources.

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) <http://www.cswe.org/CSWE/>

This Web site is an essential resource for School of Social Work faculty and students; it provides links to a wide array of resources for faculty, including ones for teaching. For those with a focus on gerontology or an interest in integrating information on older adults into their teaching, the CSWE Web site <http://depts.washington.edu/geroctr/index.html> is particularly useful. This includes links to training modules and curriculum enrichment resources. The site will be updated with new curriculum resources for teaching about substance abuse in older adults and related topics.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
<http://www.samhsa.gov/>

This Web site is a one-stop resource for free publications targeting both professionals and the larger community. Materials from this Web site include both background information and “how-to” resources for professionals working with older adults who may be impacted by substance abuse issues.

Older Americans Substance Abuse and Mental Health Technical Assistance Center

<http://www.samhsa.gov/OlderAdultsTAC/>

The mission of the Older Americans Substance Abuse and Mental Health Technical Assistance Center is to enhance the quality of life and promote the physical and mental well-being of older Americans through the provision of technical assistance by reducing the risk for and incidence of substance abuse and mental health issues late in life. The Center is designed to serve as a national repository to disseminate information, training, and direct assistance in the prevention and early intervention of substance abuse and mental health problems. Resources on the Web site include documents describing evidence-based practice in substance abuse and mental health services with older adults, summaries of special projects and presentations, and the “e-communications” quarterly newsletter with professional articles, highlights of successful older adult, mental health, and substance abuse programs and practices, and a calendar of events.