

Opioid Use in Older Adults

Question

Opioid use is a concern across all patient populations, but how is opioid use specifically affecting older adults? What should healthcare providers who treat older adults know about opioid use in this patient population?

Answer

Opioid misuse and opioid use disorders among older adults are persistent public health concerns.¹ Estimates show that nearly 1 million older adults have an opioid use disorder, and drug overdose rates for adults have increased in the past several decades.²

Research indicates that age-adjusted rates of drug overdose deaths for those 65 and older went from 13.2 to 14.7 deaths from 2022 to 2023, the largest percentage increase among age groups (in fact, death rates fell in several age groups).³ Across all age ranges, the rate of drug overdose deaths decreased 2.9 percent for men and 5.7 percent for women.⁴

In 2022 and 2023, American Indian and Alaska Native people had the highest age-adjusted rate of drug overdose deaths, whereas Asian people had the lowest. Rates decreased from 2022 to 2023 for White non-Hispanic people, but they increased for Black non-Hispanic and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander non-Hispanic people.⁵

For older adults, opioids generally are prescribed for pain associated with chronic medical conditions and surgical procedures, active-phase cancer treatment, palliative care, and end-of-life care. They can help older adults maintain their independence, which is a key predictor of health. However, adverse side effects can occur with opioid misuse, including sedation, cognitive impairment, impaired motor coordination, falls, fractures, respiratory depression, anorexia, nausea, and constipation.⁶ Further, medications affect older adults more strongly and are slower to leave their systems, leaving an opportunity for possible severe side effects.

In addition to being misused and posing an addiction threat, opioids also can present other health issues in the older population, including drug interaction problems, central nervous system effects, pruritus, urinary retention, opioid-induced hyperalgesia, increased sensitivity to pain, and cardiovascular and endocrine system effects.⁷

Healthcare providers who prescribe opioids to older adults should adopt a pain management approach that includes assessing patients' individual circumstances and the potential risks and benefits of opioid therapy. Providers may want to consider alternatives to opioids, including pain management therapies such as acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories, corticosteroids, anticonvulsants, antidepressants, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and exercise therapy.⁸

To maintain responsible prescribing practices, healthcare providers also should comply with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [CDC Clinical Practice Guideline for Prescribing Opioids for Pain – United States, 2022](#).

Additionally, SAMHSA offers program examples and helpful information in [Preventing Opioid Misuse and Treating Opioid Use Disorders in Older Adults](#). More resources are available in MedPro's [Risk Resources: Opioid Prescribing and Pain Management](#).

Endnotes

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2024, December). *Preventing opioid misuse and treating opioid use disorders in older adults*. Retrieved from <https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/opioid-misuse-older-adults-pep24-02-010.pdf>

² Ibid.; Garnett, M. F., & Minino, A. M. (2024, December). Drug overdose deaths in the United States, 2003-2023. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *NCHS Data Brief, No. 522*. Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db522.pdf

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dufort, A., & Samaan, Z. (2021). Problematic opioid use among older adults: Epidemiology, adverse outcomes and treatment considerations. *Drugs Aging, 38*(12), 1043–1053. Retrieved from www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8421190/

⁷ Tilly, J., Skowronski, S., & Ruiz, S. (2017). *The opioid public health emergency and older adults*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living. Retrieved from <https://nexusipe.org/informing/resource-center/opioid-public-health-emergency-and-older-adults>

⁸ Dey, S., Sanders, A. E., Martinez, S. Kopitnik, N. L., & Vrooman, B. M. (2024, November 25 [last updated]). Alternatives to opioids for managing pain. *StatPearls*. Retrieved from www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK574543/

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