

Substance Use Disorders for LGBTQ+ Older Adults

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Substance Use Disorders and Substance Misuse in LGBTQ+ Older Adults

Substance use disorder is an issue growing in prevalence among the older adult population in the United States.¹ Substance use disorder will be used in this fact sheet to describe any excessive, compulsive, or harmful use of a substance, whether prescribed or recreational.

The number of older adults that need treatment for substance use disorder is estimated to have reached around 1 million in 2018, and this will continue to increase as people age.¹ It is expected that LGBTQ+ older adults will make up a notable group of those needing substance use treatment in later life due to increased exposure to risk factors.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults over 50 are at increased risk for substance use when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, due to a combination of environmental, social, and health-related factors.²

Transgender older adults are also likely to have many risk factors associated with substance use in older adulthood.³

Substance use disorder is an issue that should be addressed by those that serve all older adults, and special attention should be given to the LGBTQ+ population which is more at risk for substance use disorder in older adulthood.

Major Risk Factors for Substance Use Disorder among LGBTQ+ Older Adults

Chronic Stress and Trauma: LGBTQ+ older adults are likely to have experienced a lifetime of discrimination, which lead to experiences of trauma, chronic stress, exclusion from families of origin, or weakened social circles.⁴ Trauma, chronic stress, and social isolation are risk factors for substance use disorders in older adulthood;¹ all of which occur more often in older LGBTQ+ groups.

Mental Illness and Complicated Grief: Mental illness and complicated grief are psychological conditions that are risk factors for substance use disorder in older adulthood.⁵ LGBTQ+ people are more likely to experience mental illness and might have experienced more loss in their lives than heterosexual counterparts, putting them at an increased risk for substance abuse.²

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Chronic Conditions and Pain: Older adults are at risk for self-medicating with substances to cope with chronic conditions and pain, leading to substance abuse.² LGBT older adults are more likely than their cisgender*, heterosexual counterparts to have chronic conditions and pain, also leaving them more at risk for substance use.⁶

Taking Many Medications: It is common among older adults to be prescribed several different medications from numerous sources due to chronic conditions and pain. This can lead to abuse and misuse of substances in older adults due to a lack of oversight by the uncoordinated provided care.⁷ LGBTQ+ older adults are more likely to experience chronic conditions than non-LGBTQ+ older adults, putting them more at risk for accidental and intentional misuse of prescription medications and harmful drug interactions.

It is important for aging service providers to understand the risk factors for substance use disorder in older LGBTQ+ adults. The 2016 reauthorization of the Older Americans Act now incorporated substance use and suicide prevention in the definition of “behavioral health” to bring more attention to the issues that come with substance use disorder in older adults.⁸ Often times, substance use disorder could be related to underlying health conditions, mental or physical, that are impacting the overall wellbeing of the older adult.² Additionally, the risk factors for substance use are more prevalent in LGBT older adults, and they are more likely to be impacted by substance use disorder. It is important for service providers to screen all of the older adults they see for substance use disorder. Further, it is crucial for providers to develop programs for substance use disorder that are culturally competent and inclusive of LGBTQ+ older adults to provide care to those who are affected.

Following are some resources for LGBTQ+ older adults, their care partners, and service providers to learn more about substance abuse prevention and risk management in older adulthood.

Resources

SAGE National Hotline: 1-877-360-5428

You can call this hotline if you need immediate assistance or help finding LGBTQ+ competent services near you.

[Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services | US Department of Health and Human Services](#)

This is a useful resource for information and data on substance abuse. Additionally, this source could connect you with substance treatment in your area.

National Hotline:

[Sexual and Gender Minority Substance Abuse Treatment](#) | National Institute of Health

This resource has information on and links to LGBT specific treatment centers for substance abuse.

Sources

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Morgan Van Vleck is an MSW intern for the NRC, who is passionate about advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ older adults in aging services.