

Medication and Alcohol Misuse Among Older Adults

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Prescription medication and alcohol misuse affect up to 17% of Americans ages 65 and older.¹ Pharmacists are in a powerful position to help older adults prevent and identify problems with medication and alcohol interactions, misuse, or abuse. Many older adults may not realize they are taking medications that can have dangerous interactions with alcohol or other drugs. Medication and alcohol misuse and/or abuse are not typically at the forefront of issues associated with older adults; however, pharmacists must be aware of factors that put the older population at risk, since they have a unique opportunity to recognize, prevent, and treat these problems.

The population of older adults in America is growing due, in large part, to longer life expectancies and the aging "baby-boomer" generation. Statistics from 2002 show that people who have survived to age 65 show a total average life expectancy of about 84 years.² Between 2011 and 2030, the baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, will reach age 65 and comprise approximately 20% of the total population.³

Currently, people older than 65 represent only 13% of the American population; however, they use about 30% of all prescription drugs,⁴ and 40% of them take five or more different medications per week.⁵ Older adults are more likely to suffer from chronic illnesses and are therefore more likely to use medications long-term and to use more of them.⁶ This is a concern, since up to 50% of prescription medications are not used according to physician directions.⁷ This issue is complicated further by a lack of knowledge and awareness about medication misuse in older adults. As many as 20 years ago, the National Council on Patient Information and Education (NCPPIE) described medication misuse as "America