

# MANAGING SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTIVE DISORDERS AS YOU AGE

INFORMATION FOR OLDER ADULTS, FAMILIES,  
AND CAREGIVERS



## READ THIS PAMPHLET TO LEARN:

- What are Substance Use and Addictive Disorders.
- Why Older Adults Are More At Risk.
- How to Manage and Treat Substance Use and Addictive Disorders.



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# WHAT ARE SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTIVE DISORDERS?

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Substance use and addictive disorders effect people of all ages, including older adults. Older adults can be more vulnerable to these disorders for a variety of reasons, however, there are treatments and tools that can help.

Substance Use Disorders are conditions where an individual experiences physical dependence on a substance and needs that substance to be able to cope with daily life. These disorders include:

- **Substance abuse** – when an individual consumes harmful quantities of a substance in a way that is not intended or recommended.



- **Substance dependence (or addiction)** – the psychological and physical inability to stop consuming a substance, even though the substance is harmful.

Addictive disorders are conditions where an individual experiences a change in behavior that is not caused by the consumption of a substance, for example gambling addiction.

# WHY ARE OLDER ADULTS MORE VULNERABLE TO THESE DISORDERS?

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Older adults can experience certain events in life that can make them more vulnerable to substance use and addictive disorders. Some of these experiences include:

## LIFE TRANSITIONS

Retirement, or relocation to a nursing or retirement home

## GRIEF AND LOSS

Losing a spouse, family member, close friend or pet



## FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES

Losing a stream of income or being faced with financial difficulties.

## TAKING SLEEP AIDS

Using substances like alcohol or other drugs to try to sleep.

## MEDICATION USE

Using medications to treat existing health conditions and mixing these medications with non-prescribed drugs and substances like alcohol.



## PHYSICAL CHANGES

As we age, our bodies can become less tolerant of tobacco and alcohol.

# WHICH SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTIVE DISORDERS DO OLDER ADULTS COMMONLY FACE?

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Alcohol and tobacco use disorders are the most common substance use disorders experienced by older adults. Gambling, an addictive disorder, is also common.

## Alcohol Use Disorder

Alcohol is the most commonly abused substance among all age groups. In 2017, the Canadian Tobacco Alcohol and Drugs Survey found 75% of older adults reported drinking alcohol in the past year.



If you believe you have an alcohol use disorder, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Have you ever thought you should cut down on your drinking?
2. Have you ever felt annoyed by others' criticism of your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt guilty about your drinking?
4. Do you consume alcohol first thing in the morning?

If you responded "yes" to one or more questions, talk to your primary care provider or an addictions professional.

## Tobacco Use Disorder

According to the 2017 Tobacco Use in Canada's report, 11% of older adults smoke tobacco daily, making them the fourth highest smoking age group in Canada; however, they are the group most impacted by the negative physical effects of tobacco use on the body.



Smoking tobacco is associated with 20 types of cancer, including lung, kidney and bladder cancer as well as heart disease and strokes. Long term tobacco use can also weaken bones, deteriorate vision and decrease blood circulation.

By quitting tobacco use, older adults can reverse some of the effects caused by prolonged tobacco use, and add two to three years back to their life expectancies

### **Gambling Disorder**

Gambling is common among older adults because some may no longer be working or may face financial strains. Forms of gambling include casino games, bingo, scratch-and-win tickets, lotteries, betting on sports events, playing the stock market and internet gambling.

Signs of a gambling disorder include:

- Spending more on gambling than intended.
- Feeling bad, sad or guilty after gambling.
- Placing larger and more frequent bets.
- Not having enough money for food, rent or bills after gambling.
- Loss of interest and participation in normal activities with friends and family.
- Placing a high priority on gambling.
- Being secretive about your time and money being spent on gambling.



# WHAT SIGNS CAN OLDER ADULTS PRESENT?

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An older adult addicted to gambling or abusing substances may present signs that are typical of other health conditions that are strongly associated with ageing which can be why these disorders are harder to diagnose, or may be easily overlooked. Some of these signs include:



## BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS

- Increased aggression or irritability.
- Social withdrawal.
- Lack of energy or enthusiasm.



## COGNITIVE SIGNS

- Confusion and disorientation.
- Memory impairment.
- Daytime drowsiness.
- Slurred speech.



## PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Weight changes.
- Poor hygiene and self-neglect.
- Poor coordination.
- Unexplained injuries.



## PSYCHIATRIC SIGNS

- Sleep disturbances.
- Mood swings.
- Anxiety.
- Depression .

## WHAT ARE SOME TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTIVE DISORDERS?

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There is no one-size-fits-all treatment for older adults experiencing substance use or addictive disorders, however, there are a number of possible treatment options that include:



- Cognitive and behavioural therapies.
- Self-help or group therapy.
- Mindfulness, motivational interviewing and exercise.
- Therapy that includes family and other loved ones.
- Medication and drug-based treatment.
- Harm reduction (strategies to reduce the negative consequences of substance use).

## WHAT ARE SOME TIPS TO LOWER THE RISK OF SUBSTANCE USE AND ADDICTIVE DISORDERS?

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### Tips for older adults

The following activities can help to lower the risks linked to substance use and addictive disorders in older adults:

- Maintaining good nutrition.
- Exercising at least three times a week.
- Maintaining strong social connections.



Older adults taking prescribed medications to treat existing health conditions should strive to:

- Adhere to the prescribed dosage of your medications.
- Keep track of any medication side effects and talk to one's prescriber.
- Avoid places and people that may trigger you to consume medications and substances in harmful ways.

## Tips for Caregivers

If you are caring for an individual who may be presenting signs of having a substance use and/or addictive disorder, you can use the harm reduction approach to ensure they are as safe as possible.



These strategies can include:

- Ensuring their basic needs, such as for food and shelter, are met.
- Helping them learn safer ways to use the substance or partake in the activity in proportion to the amount they are addicted to and possibly in smaller amounts over time.
- Respecting the autonomy and choices of the older adult.



## WHERE CAN I FIND MORE INFORMATION?

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### CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

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The Canadian Mental Health Association provides mental health and substance use and addiction services across Canada. Services include: group therapy, inpatient treatment, 12 support groups and community treatment.



<https://ontario.cmha.ca/>



1-800-875-6213

### CONNEXONTARIO

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ConnexOntario provides free and confidential health services information for people experiencing problems with alcohol and drugs, mental illness and/or gambling. The information and referral services are available 24 hours a day.



[www.connexontario.ca](http://www.connexontario.ca)



1-866-531-2600

### COMMUNITY OUTREACH PROGRAM IN ADDICTIONS - COPA

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The COPA program helps adults 55 years and over who struggle with addictions that impact their daily lives. Services include: outreach-based treatment, seeing clients in their homes, harm reduction, motivational interviewing/counselling and solution focused therapy.



<https://www.reconnect.on.ca/copa>

### CENTRE FOR ADDICTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

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The Centre for Addictions and Mental Health offers addictions counselling services, and is a source of information about addictions, management strategies and further resources.



[www.camh.ca](http://www.camh.ca)



1-800-463-2338

# NOTES



# RELEVANT RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES

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- Alcohol and Your Health
- Managing Sedative-Hypnotic Use Among Older Adults
- Recognizing and Managing Depression
- Safe Medication Use for Older Adults

## **ADDITIONAL HEALTH RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES:**

- Advance Care Planning: How to Start the Conversation
- Calcium, Vitamin D and Bone Health
- General Tips for Managing Memory Problems
- Improving Nutrition as You Age
- Improving Urinary Incontinence
- Living Longer, Living Well – Your Guide to Healthy Ageing
- Managing Caregiver Stress
- Managing Chronic Pain
- Managing Common Mental Health Conditions in Older Adults
- Managing Constipation
- Managing Mild Cognitive Impairment, Alzheimer’s Disease & Other Dementias
- Managing Multiple Chronic Health Conditions
- Managing Sleep in Older Adults
- Preventing and Managing Diabetes in Older Persons
- Preventing Falls at Home
- Recognizing and Managing Anxiety
- Recognizing and Managing Delirium
- Recognizing and Managing Hearing Loss
- Staying Active As You Age
- Substitute Decision Makers and Powers of Attorney

## **ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY RESOURCES IN OUR SERIES:**

- Community Transportation Options
- Driving Assessment Services
- Elder Abuse
- Funding for Mobility and Other Aids from the Assistive Devices Program
- Housing Options for Older Adults
- How to Register for Wheel-Trans
- Meals on Wheels

Visit [www.sinaigeriatrics.ca/healtheducation](http://www.sinaigeriatrics.ca/healtheducation) for additional resources for older adults, families and caregivers.

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