

## Boomers' Drug Use Could Create Big Challenge

(Feb. 9) — Forget the obvious scourges of growing old: cancer, osteoporosis, dementia. The unexpected health threat to millions of aging Americans might actually be their own substance abuse.

As baby boomers hit their 50s, rates of marijuana and illicit prescription drug use are rising. A survey of 20,000 older Americans by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) recently concluded that nearly 5 percent of those older than 50 had either smoked pot or popped pills within the past month. That's up from 2.7 percent in 2002.

As baby boomers get older, SAMHSA estimates that the number of people seeking treatment for substance abuse will double by 2020.

Marijuana was largely the drug of choice: It was more commonly used than prescription drugs, and 8.7 percent of men ages 50 to 54 had smoked pot within the past month.

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As substance abuse rises among baby boomers, more aging Americans are smoking marijuana than illicitly using prescription drugs.

Most of the boomers who opted to use illicit substances had been doing so for decades. Born into a generation of permissiveness, they just never stopped.

But health officials warn that lifelong drug use means a greater likelihood of health complications, like lung cancer or heart attack, as users get older. They also warn that feebler, older bodies create a greater danger of falls and accidents when individuals are impaired by mind-altering substances. And deeply rooted addictions can be more difficult, and more expensive, to treat.

Not to mention the inevitable interactions between illicit drugs and prescribed ones. In the study, SAMHSA cautions that

prescribed medications could be less effective because of unintended interactions, and it even warns of potentially life-threatening consequences. It also notes that doctors may misdiagnose Alzheimer's or dementia when, in fact, a patient is simply experiencing out-there side effects.

Contending with health problems among baby boomers is one thing, but the implications for intervention and treatment need to be considered as well. The number of drug treatment facilities would need to double by 2020 in order to treat the surge in addictions, according to Peter Delaney, SAMHSA's director of the Office of Applied Studies.

But those running treatment facilities say they aren't equipped or properly designed for a surge in older patients. "Addiction treatment centers typically have an 'institutional' feel, with hospital beds and linoleum floors," Joe Lemon at the Abbey Addiction Center in Bettendorf, Iowa, said in an interview with AOL News. "While younger folks can tolerate that environment, older clients prefer to be in a more home-like setting."

Lemon reports that he's been "shocked" by the recent uptick in older patients at the Abbey Center, as well as the resistance many have to admitting that their drug use is even a problem.

"The baby boomers were really the first generation in America to have a fairly open experience with recreational drugs," he said. "Even clients who may realize deep down that their drug or alcohol abuse is a problem can have difficulty in admitting that, because their generation had embraced it as part of their lifestyle."

And while health experts are sounding the alarm at this latest study, the actual number of baby boomers getting high might be much greater. Physicians aren't trained to ask their older patients about illicit drug use, nor is it recommended that

they do, according to the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force. Even surveys like the SAMHSA poll could be inaccurate, as participants might not fess up because of concerns about legality.

Then again, the SAMHSA report doesn't differentiate between detrimental substance abuse and recreational or medicinal use, nor does it factor in addictions to legal substances such as alcohol and cigarettes. A 2009 survey of 11,000 American boomers concluded that 22 percent of men and 9 percent of women were "binge drinking" on a regular basis.

Lemon said addiction experts need to consider both legal and illegal outlets for substance abuse, especially because boomers are facing emotional stress that can perpetuate addiction. "We observe that emotional considerations — like layoffs, retirement, old age and illness — can exacerbate addiction, but they aren't typically the cause of addiction," he said. "What we have come to learn in the field of addiction treatment is how co-occurring disorders affect addiction, and how they must be treated simultaneously."

David McNew, Getty Images

As marijuana laws loosen, officials say baby boomers may be more likely to light up. Here, several types of marijuana are on display at a medical marijuana dispensary in Los Angeles, Calif.

But as this enormous segment of the population — boomers comprise at least 25 percent of every U.S. state but Utah — keeps aging, the number of drug-using baby boomers could keep growing, at least where marijuana is concerned. State legislation on marijuana control, especially for medical reasons, continues to loosen. In Colorado, 60,000 people are licensed to light up. Even State Senator Chris Romer, 51, told CNN he'd consider it.

"I think you're having a lot of baby boomers who, all of us, are feeling a lot of aches and pains [and] are going to decide to

try medical marijuana,” he said. “I personally haven’t tried it yet, but I’m not saying someday before I’m done I won’t.”

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