

Marijuana Use After Age 50

Facts & Emerging Issues



For many, the transition from young adult to middle adulthood brings a wide range of changes. Among them is a general decline in the use of illicit drugs. Yet, researchers have found that illicit drug use *after* middle adulthood in older adulthood (age 50 or older) is on the rise. In fact, there is an estimated 5.7 million older Americans with substance use disorder (SUD).¹

Research suggests that the increase in SUD among older adults may be due, at least in part, to the high rate of drug use by this population (Baby Boomers born 1946-1964). Though SUD is a growing problem and public health concern among older adults, it often goes undiagnosed and undertreated. Researchers say shame either on the part of the user or the user's family, and reluctance to seek help have a lot to do with it, as does an assumption that treatment is a "waste" of healthcare resources for those of a certain age.

Why Older Adults Use

There are three primary reasons this particular age group is more likely to use illicit drugs:²

1. **Cultural:** They grew up when drugs were available and even glamorized.
2. **Economic:** They're anxious over lack or loss of retirement/savings in the aftermath of economic recessions.
3. **Emotional:** They're looking for ways to cope in the grief after loss of career or partner.

Another reason older adults use is simply because they believe it's okay. One study showed that 58% of Americans age 55 and older believe that smoking pot is morally acceptable.³ In addition, the increased availability of marijuana, the widely touted claims of its medicinal benefits, and an overall decrease in the stigma surrounding the substance are all additional factors contributing to older adult use.

Surprising Statistics

- 54% of adults age 50+ used marijuana²
- 1 in 20 older Americans used marijuana within the past month⁴
- Men 60-64 report the highest rates of marijuana use⁵
- Use nearly doubled among men 65-69 and men 70-74⁵
- Cannabis use in those 65+ increased by 75% from 2015-2018⁶
- 25% of marijuana users age 65+ reported that a doctor recommended marijuana in the past year⁷

The U.S. Food & Drug Administration has not approved marijuana as a medicine. The Ohio Medical Marijuana Control Program, created by House Bill 523 and passed in 2016, legalized medical marijuana in the state. It allows certified physicians to recommend marijuana products under the rigorous guidelines of the Program. Visit medicalmarijuana.ohio.gov for more.

Marijuana and the Aging Body

The way the body metabolizes marijuana is dependent on a number of factors, including a person's age, use habits, form of marijuana, and more. Metabolically speaking, older adults are slower to process substances with marijuana being no exception. Also, older adult brains are more sensitive in general to substances – including illicit drugs.

Health Issues

Marijuana in older adults – or any age for that matter – is linked to a number of health concerns including:⁷

- Chronic respiratory conditions
- Depression
- Memory issues
- Adverse cardiovascular functions
- Altered judgment and motor skills

Adverse Drug Interactions – In general, older adults are more likely to experience heart and lung problems, memory issues, mood disorders, and other chronic health conditions that require prescription medication. Prescription medication combined with marijuana may complicate or worsen existing health issues. In particular, cannabis is known to adversely interact with blood thinners and anti-seizure medications.

Cardiovascular Concerns – Marijuana is known to elevate both heart rate and blood pressure. Older adults with an existing heart condition, or even underlying and undiagnosed disease, may be at risk of a cardiac event in the event of accidental ingestion of a high dose of cannabis.

Brain Functions – Cognitive health tends to decline with age. Couple that with marijuana's effect on the brain and the risks go up for confusion and memory issues, not to mention impaired judgment, coordination, and reaction time. Falls, crashes, and other accidents pose a great risk to older adults than younger populations.⁷

Well-Being – In spite of the fact that cannabis use in older adults is rapidly rising – actually exceeding all other age groups⁸ – more data and clinical research is needed for appropriate interventions and policies that will improve the health and well-being of this population.

About Us

Prevention
Action Alliance



Prevention Action Alliance is a 501(c)3 nonprofit located in Columbus, Ohio. We're dedicated to leading healthy communities in the prevention of substance misuse and the promotion of mental health wellness. Learn more at preventionactionalliance.org.

The mission of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) is to provide statewide leadership on the topics of mental health and addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery. Learn more about OhioMHAS at mha.ohio.gov.

About This Campaign

Because much of the public conversation surrounding marijuana has been based on anecdotes rather than science, Prevention Action Alliance and the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services created this campaign to help people better understand the facts about marijuana and its effects.

If you found this article helpful, we encourage you to share it with others. You can also find other fact sheets about marijuana at: preventionactionalliance.org/marijuana

If you have concerns about your own use of marijuana or a loved one's, and wish to seek help, go to: findtreatment.samhsa.gov/

Contact Us

For more information on marijuana, please contact us at:
Prevention Action Alliance
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preventionactionalliance.org

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