

Substance Abuse in the Elderly

Roseann Mulligan DDS, MS

Definitions:

- Abuse: to use wrongly, badly, excessively; to misuse
- Misuse: to use incorrectly or improperly; to abuse

Types of Substances Implicated

- Legal
- Illicit

Research on this Issue?

- Little with elderly individuals
- Alcohol and the elderly, some data

Alcohol

- Most common drug causing CNS changes
- Older individuals
 - drink < than younger
 - Fewer heavy drinkers
 - 9% (60+) vs 26% (20 yr olds)
 - > of abstainers
 - 41% (60+ yrs) vs 14% (20olds)

Regular Users of Alcohol

- Drinking frequently found among
 - Highly active seniors
 - Seniors with “good” health

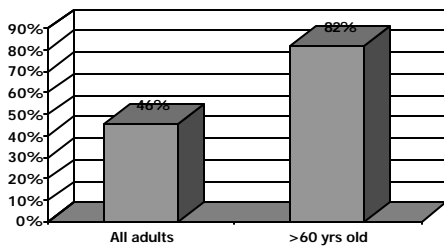
Problems Related to Alcohol and the Elderly

- Public intoxication
- Mental health effects
- Lack of treatment

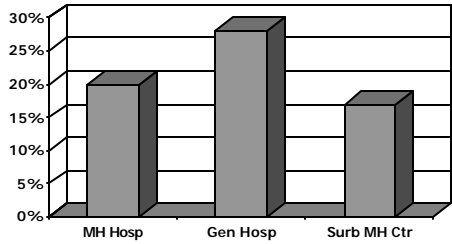
Public Intoxication

- Peak age for arrest for intoxication
– 50-59 years old
- Typically white males

Arrests for Drunkenness as a % of all Arrests



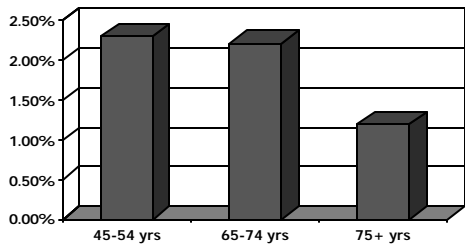
Admission Related Serious Drinking Problems in the Elderly



Lack of Treatment

- Household Survey: "Have you or any member of your household ever had problems because of too much drinking?"

Prevalence of Problems with Drinking: Results of Survey



Detecting Alcohol Abuse

C
A
G
E

Detecting Alcohol Abuse

Questions:

- C** = Ever decided you would cut down?
- A** = Do you get annoyed when people talk to you about how much you drink?
- G** = Do you have guilt feelings later about your drinking?
- E** = Do you ever need an eye-opener to get going the next day?

Types of Geriatric Alcoholism

- Aging alcoholics, drinking most of their lives
- Began drinking late in life (10 – 15% of alcoholics in treatment)

Problems for Aging Alcoholics

- Cirrhosis of liver
- Respiratory disease
 - Seizures
- Chronic brain syndrome

Started Drinking in Later Life

- To deal with the stresses of aging
 - Physical illness/infirmity
 - Boredom/retirement
 - Loneliness
 - Depression
 - Bereavement

Treatment Outcome

- No relationship to prognosis:
 - Number of years of drinking
- Definite relationship to prognosis:
 - Age of alcoholic patient at time of admission
 - Older patients show improvement unlike some other age groups

Alcohol as a Treatment?

- Moderate drinkers live longer than abstainers
- Still looking for cause beyond increased sociability

Other Legal Drugs

- Used far more in younger patient populations
- Most common drugs ease symptoms of the common diseases of the elderly:
 - CV meds
 - HTN meds including diuretics
 - Tranquillizers
 - Sedative - hypnotics

More Subject to Misuse/Abuse

- Readily available
- Data difficult to obtain on rate of misuse/abuse
- Acute drug reaction experience from legal drugs in this age group
- To control behavior in nursing home environment

Illegal Drug Use in the Elderly

- Number is unknown
- Camouflaging habits through adaptive techniques
 - Switching to Rx meds or alcohol when illicit supply not available
- Streetwise
- Low profile in the community

Addicts are Great Masqueraders

- Psychiatric symptoms are prominent
- Patients complain of a variety of problems which are actually result of addiction

Common Characteristics w/ Any Addiction

- Denial
- Rationalization
- Defocuses
- Minimization
- Enabling behavior of family

Natural History of Addiction

- Regardless of the drug or individual involved
- Multiple stages:
 - Learning
 - Seeking
 - Dependence
 - Harmful dependency
 - Addiction

Diagnosis of Substance Use Disorder

- More appropriate with younger individuals
 - Marital problems
 - Occupational difficulties
 - Legal difficulties
- Elderly definition
 - Frequently (not necessarily daily) use of a potentially addictive substance
 - Associated with biomedical, psychological or social consequences

Assessment

- Complete medical or psychological history
- Complete physical examination
- Corroboration of all patient statements
- Drug use history
- Family history of addiction
- Problems specific to the elderly

Problems Specific to the Elderly

- Falls
- Cognitive dysfunction
- Sexual dysfunction
- Incontinence
- Malnutrition
- Complications of drug-alcohol interactions

Treatment of Elderly Addict

- Characteristics of a successful program
 - Attention to patient's physical & psychological condition
 - Active treatment of family
 - Goal is complete sobriety
 - Group oriented treatment
- Illness not moral decay
- Activities for patient and family
