

America's workforce is getting older. As members of the baby boom generation—people born between 1946 and 1964—age, the proportion of workers over 55 years old will increase dramatically. As this population grows, so too will the number of employed older adults with substance use disorders.¹

DID YOU KNOW?

As of February 2008 there were more than 27 million individuals in the U.S. labor force who were age 55 or over, accounting for 18 percent of the entire labor force.² This percentage is expected to grow to 19 percent by 2012.³

FAST FACTS

- ◆ Replacing an employee costs from 25 percent to almost 200 percent of annual compensation—not including the loss of institutional knowledge, service continuity, and coworker productivity and morale that can accompany employee turnover.⁴
- ◆ Turnover decreases with age until employees reach their mid- to late-50s, then increases sharply because of retirements.⁵
- ◆ Nearly 7 in 10 baby boomers plan to work at some time during the traditional retirement years.⁶

Drug and alcohol problems cost the nation an estimated \$276 billion a year, with much of the cost resulting from lost work productivity and increased healthcare expenses.⁷ Given that 76 percent of people with drug or alcohol problems are working,⁸ employers have a major stake in ensuring that employees have access to substance abuse treatment.

How Substance Abuse Costs Employers

Drug and alcohol abuse can be costly to employers in a variety of ways:

Increased healthcare and insurance costs

- ◆ Healthcare costs for employees with alcohol problems are twice those for other employees.⁹
- ◆ People who abuse drugs or alcohol are three and a half times more likely than others to be involved in a workplace accident.¹⁰

Reduced productivity

- ◆ Lost work productivity (including absenteeism and poor job performance) associated with substance abuse costs the nation an estimated \$197 billion a year.¹¹

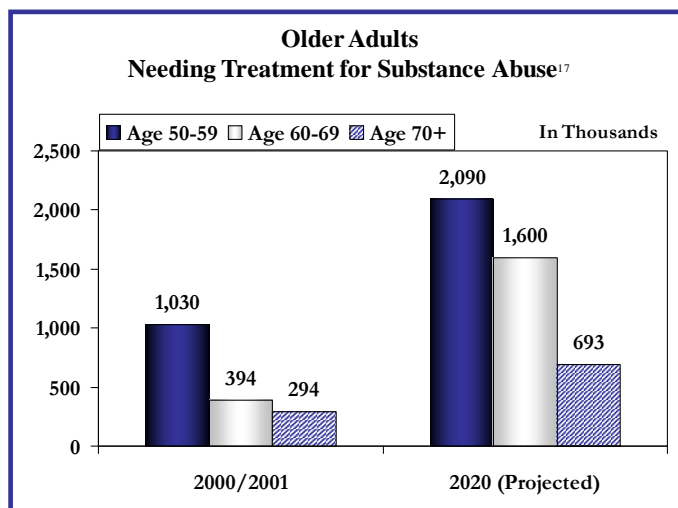
Increased worker turnover

- ◆ People with drug or alcohol problems were more likely than others to report having worked for three or more employers in the previous year.¹²

How Substance Abuse Affects Older Workers

Misuse of drugs, alcohol, or prescription medications by older adults can have serious negative consequences:

- ◆ Substance use disorders can exacerbate already costly medical conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes, which are more common among older than among younger adults.¹³
- ◆ Older people who consume alcohol are highly susceptible to the damaging effects of drug-alcohol interactions not only because they are more likely to be taking multiple medications but also because they metabolize both medications and alcohol more slowly than do younger people.¹⁴
- ◆ Because over-consumption of alcohol suppresses the immune system, it puts drinkers at increased risk of infection. It also impairs the balance and judgment of older adults, increasing the likelihood of falls and other accidents.¹⁵
- ◆ Older adults with alcohol problems also are more likely than people without drinking problems to manage their physical pain with alcohol.¹⁶



How Employers Can Help Older Workers

Substance abuse treatment that is tailored to an individual's needs has proven as effective as treatment for chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes.¹⁸ Investing in substance use treatment for employees can yield savings that exceed costs by a ratio of 12 to 1.¹⁹

By taking just a few important steps, employers can contribute to the overall health of older workers while improving their own bottom lines:

1. Ensure that Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)* or company wellness programs include substance abuse screening, education, and support for recovery. Be sure providers of these programs understand the unique impact substance use disorders may have on older workers and how to communicate with this specific population about the effects of drug and alcohol use on their health.
2. Ask health plans to require their providers to confidentially screen all patients for substance use disorders.
3. Provide employees with comprehensive health plan benefits that support a broad range of services, including screening, brief intervention, counseling and medical services, and promote customized treatment for alcohol problems.

***Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)** are designed to help identify and resolve productivity problems affecting employees who are impaired by personal concerns. EAPs come in many different forms, from telephone-based services to on-site programs. Face-to-face programs provide more comprehensive services for employees with substance use disorders, including screening, treatment referrals and follow-up care.

For More Information

- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, www.samhsa.gov
- SAMHSA's Division of Workplace Programs, <http://www.drugfreeworkplace.gov/>
- National Institute on Drug Abuse, www.nida.nih.gov

- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>

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- ¹⁶*Ibid.*
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