

PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

Rx abuse among older adults harder to detect

By CONSTANCE GUSTKE
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Drug addiction is not restricted to the young.

Donna Weber, now 53, turned to painkillers after undergoing simple surgery.

Then a long, tortured path to divorce made her anxious and depressed.

Soon, she found herself on a candy-colored pill roller coaster.

Unlike street drugs, the pharmaceutical pills were easy to obtain legally. She got them from emergency rooms, dentists, psychiatrists, even plastic surgeons.

"I went to doctors with exaggerated truths," explained Weber, who once had four doctors. "I said I hurt more and more."

But constant pill popping took a huge toll.

A few years ago, she could barely get out of her bedroom. Sometimes she woke up and felt like she couldn't breathe.

Last year, she began contemplating suicide.

She finally called an addiction hotline and ended up taking a plane from her home in Colorado to a treatment center in Southern California.

"I didn't think I was addicted," said Weber, who is now drug-free

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JOSEPH GARBELY
medical director,
Caron Treatment Centers

and living in Los Angeles. "But sometimes the pain pills are causing the pain, not the injuries. So you take more. I was naïve."

Prince's death spotlighted

The death of Prince in April from an accidental overdose of pain pills has brought new attention to opioid addiction. It has also highlighted the extent of prescription drug abuse among older adults, particularly those with plenty of money to spend.

Access to multiple doctors, many helping hands and lots of financial wherewithal can help cloak the warning signs of addiction, experts say.

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More older adults are becoming addicted to powerful pain pills like OxyContin and Percocet to drown out the aches and pains of aging.

Women may end up becoming dependent on pain relievers more quickly than men, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and their overdoses have been rising rapidly.

As prosperous baby boomers age, their prescription drug use is increasing, too, said Indra Cidambi, medical director at the Center for Network Therapy, an outpatient detox facility in Middlesex, N.J. It is mostly pain pills, Xanax and Valium, she said.

But though wealth provides many boomers with financial freedom, she explained, retirement often gives them anxiety, too.

Addiction can begin with a simple request for something to stop back pain, she said. But even starting on low doses of opioids can quickly turn into abuse. Why?

There are two factors for aging adults: drug tolerance that builds with time, and the body's slowing metabolism, which gives drugs a bigger effect.

TURN TO ABUSE/A13



DUSTIN CHAMBERS/FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Carol Waldman, 64, became addicted to Xanax, which was prescribed by a psychiatrist, and to pain pills for chronic back and knee problems.