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Drug abuse among seniors hard to detect

Access to multiple doctors and ample financial wherewithal can mask warning signs of addiction

By Constance Gustke
The New York Times

Drug addiction is not restricted to the young. Donna Weber, 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.

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

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.

"They've built a fortress around themselves," said Joseph Garbely, medical director of Caron Treatment Centers. "Their resources allow them to advance in their addiction without detection. So the addiction progresses."

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.

"By 10 days of usage, you can be addicted," Cidambi said. "You don't think of affluent, well-put-together women as addicts. But I see this happening constantly. It's out of the box."

Caregivers and doctors rarely notice the problem at its early stages. "Few doctors screen for addiction," said R. Corey Waller, an addiction, pain and emergency medicine specialist and senior medical director for education and policy at the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers in New Jersey. "It's not built into treatment yet, and adding that step takes lots of time. Also, patients are usually offended when asked."

So an addiction is often discovered only after a bad fall, confusion or even an accidental overdose, Garbely said. And even then it can sometimes be difficult to detect since signs of addiction can often be dismissed as symptoms of aging.

The loss of self-worth that sometimes comes with retirement, especially after a lifetime of achievement and accolades, can be the spark. Moreover, addiction thrives on a lack of structure and accountability, explained Brenda J. Iliff, executive director of Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation in Naples, Fla.

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

She didn't think the pain pills were addictive and even took some of her husband's. Then in August, she ended up in bed a lot and endured a series of blackouts. "I was in a fog," she remembered, and her husband was doing all the chores.

After she dislocated her knee, an emergency room doctor told her family there was something wrong with her medications. Soon after that, the intervention began. Her family came over for dinner; then the family rabbi rang the doorbell.

"Everyone wanted me to get my life back," she said. She ended up at a Caron center in the senior unit for 10 weeks.

Her detox took 20 days, and more than six months passed until her system was clear.

Detoxing older adults from prescription drugs

is tricky. "They have to be monitored and slowly withdrawn," Garbely said. "Opioid withdrawal won't kill you, but you'll wish you were dead."

For seniors, he added, treatment is also slower because there may be physical and cognitive issues, too.



Carol Waldman, 64, who became addicted to Xanax and to pain pills for chronic back and knee problems, is shown at her home in Atlanta. Symptoms of addiction are often confused with aging, and prosperous baby boomers with access to more doctors and money can hide abuse well. DUSTIN CHAMBERS/THE NEW YORK TIMES