

The NSDUH Report

April 22, 2005

Substance Use among Older Adults: 2002 and 2003 Update

In Brief

- In 2002 and 2003, 17.1 percent of persons aged 50 or older had smoked cigarettes, 45.1 percent drank alcohol, and 1.8 percent had used an illicit drug during the past month
- Older adults were less likely to have used cigarettes, alcohol, or illicit drugs during the past month than younger adults
- Among older adults, males were more likely than females to be past month cigarette smokers, alcohol users, binge drinkers, heavy drinkers, or illicit drug users

Although substance use is more common among younger adults (aged 18 to 49) than among older adults (aged 50 or older), the misuse of alcohol and the use of illicit drugs are increasing among older adults.^{1,2} The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) asks persons aged 12 or older to report their substance use, including cigarettes, alcohol, and illicit drugs. NSDUH defines “any illicit drug” use as use of marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), inhalants, hallucinogens, heroin, or prescription-type drugs used non-medically.³ This report examines the prevalence of cigarette, alcohol, and illicit drug use among older adults as compared with younger adults. All findings presented in this report are annual averages based on combined 2002 and 2003 NSDUH data.⁴

Cigarette, Alcohol, and Illicit Drug Use among Older Adults

Combined 2002 and 2003 NSDUH data indicated that an estimated 17.1 percent of persons aged 50 or older (13.7 million persons) had smoked cigarettes in the past month (Figure 1). An estimated 45.1 percent of older adults (36.0 million persons) drank alcohol in the past month. Approximately 12.2 percent of older adults reported binge alcohol use⁵ and 3.2 percent reported heavy alcohol use.⁶ An estimated 1.8 percent of older adults (1.4 million persons) had used an illicit drug in the past month. Marijuana was the most commonly used illicit drug (1.1 percent), followed by prescription-type drugs used nonmedically (0.7 percent) and cocaine (0.2 percent). Older adults were less likely to have used cigarettes, alcohol, and illicit drugs during the past month than younger adults.

Demographic Differences

In 2002 and 2003, males aged 50 or older were more likely to report substance use than females in this age group (Figure 2).⁷ For example, the rate of past month binge alcohol use was three times greater among older males than older females (19.2 vs. 6.3 percent), and the rate of past month heavy alcohol use was more than 7 times greater among older males than older females (6.1 vs. 0.8 percent). Past month illicit drug use also was greater among

Figure 1. Percentages of Past Month Cigarette, Alcohol, and Illicit Drug Use among Older and Younger Adults: 2002 and 2003

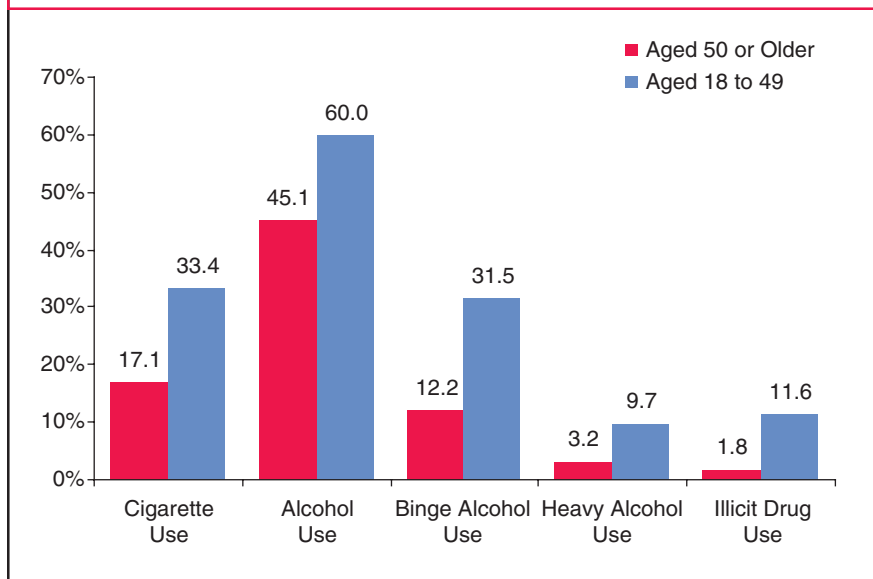
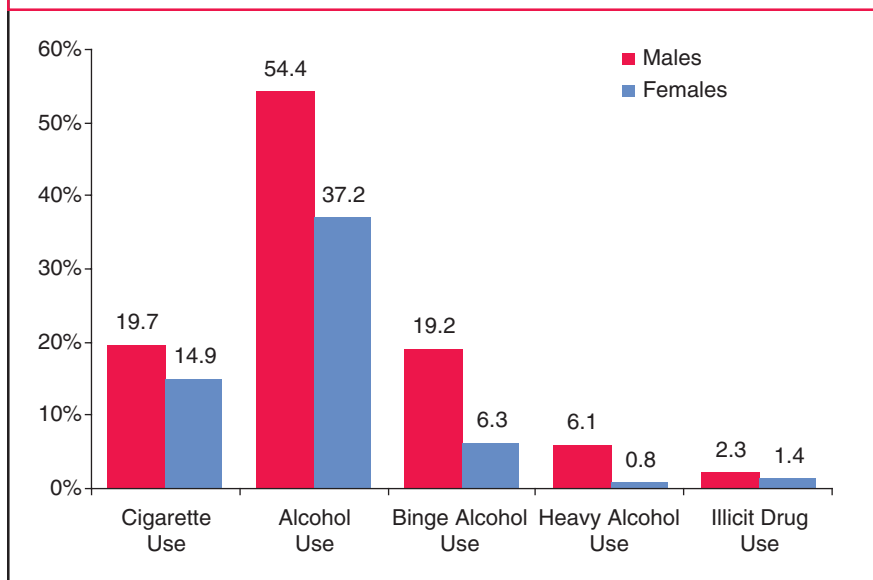


Figure 2. Percentages of Past Month Cigarette, Alcohol, and Illicit Drug Use among Older Adults, by Gender: 2002 and 2003

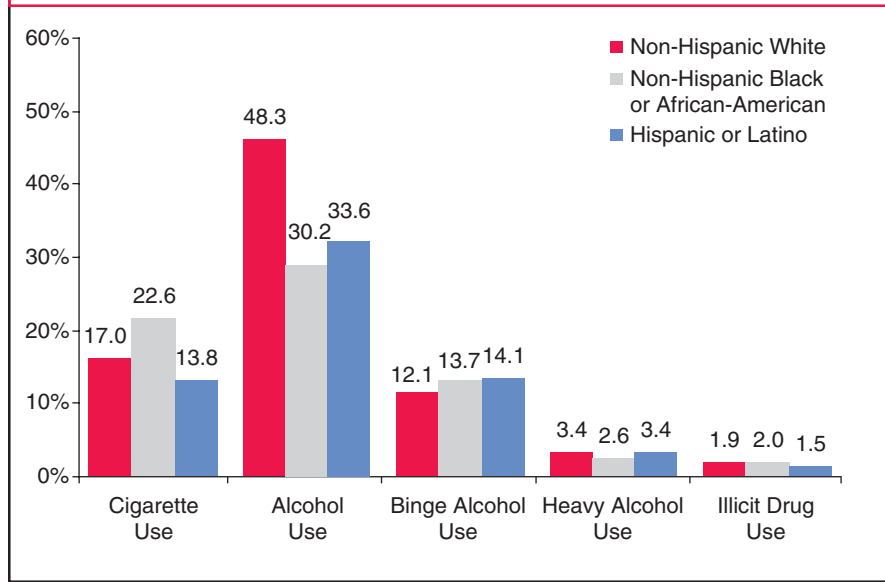


older males than older females. The rate of past month marijuana use was more than two times greater among older males than older females (1.5 vs. 0.6 percent). However, the rate of non-medical use of prescription-type

drugs tended to be greater among older females than older males (0.9 vs. 0.6 percent), although the difference was not statistically significant.

Past month cigarette use by older adults was significantly

Figure 3. Percentages of Past Month Cigarette, Alcohol, and Illicit Drug Use among Older Adults, by Race/Ethnicity: 2002 and 2003



greater among non-Hispanic blacks (22.6 percent) than among non-Hispanic whites (17.0 percent) and Hispanics (13.8 percent) (Figure 3). Past month alcohol use by older adults was greater among non-Hispanic whites (48.3 percent) than among non-Hispanic blacks (30.2 percent) or Hispanics (33.6 percent). For older adults, overall illicit drug use in the past month did not differ significantly by race/ethnicity, but marijuana use was greater among non-Hispanic whites (1.2 percent) and non-Hispanic blacks

(0.9 percent) than among Hispanics (0.2 percent). Also, there were no significant differences in the rates of binge alcohol use or heavy alcohol use across these racial/ethnic groups.

End Notes

1. Blow, F. C. (2000). Substance abuse among older adults: An invisible epidemic. In F. C. Blow (Ed., Consensus Panel Chair), *Substance abuse among older adults* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 98-3179, Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series 26, Chapter 1). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies. Available at <http://www.health.org/govpubs/BKD250/>

2. Korper, S. P., & Council, C. L. (Eds.). (2002). *Substance use by older adults: Estimates of future impact on the treatment system* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 03-3763, Analytic Series A-21). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies. Available at <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/analytic.htm>
3. NSDUH defines nonmedical use of prescription-type drugs as use not prescribed for the respondent by a physician or use only for the experience or feeling they caused. Nonmedical use of any prescription-type pain reliever, sedative, stimulant, or tranquilizer does not include over-the-counter drugs.
4. The estimates for persons aged 50 years or older who used cigarettes, alcohol, and illicit drugs in their lifetime and during the past year were similar for 2002 and 2003. The 2002 and 2003 NSDUH data were combined to increase the sample size.
5. NSDUH defines binge alcohol use as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion (i.e., at the same time or within a couple of hours of each other) on at least 1 day in the past 30 days.
6. NSDUH defines heavy alcohol use as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion (i.e., at the same time or within a couple of hours of each other) on each of 5 or more days in the past 30 days. All heavy alcohol users also are binge alcohol users.
7. When comparing substance use by gender among persons aged 50 or older, age has a confounding effect because females as a group are older than males. However, adjusting the percentages of substance use for older adult males and females to control for age reduces, but does not eliminate, gender differences.

Figure Note

Source: SAMHSA, 2002 and 2003 NSDUH.

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) is an annual survey sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Prior to 2002, this survey was called the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA). The 2002 and 2003 data are based on information obtained from 135,910 persons aged 12 or older, including 11,401 persons aged 50 or older. The survey collects data by administering questionnaires to a representative sample of the population through face-to-face interviews at their place of residence.

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International in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. (RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.)

Information and data for this issue are based on the following publications and statistics:

Office of Applied Studies. (2004). *Results from the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National findings* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 04-3964, NSDUH Series H-25). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Office of Applied Studies. (2003). *Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health:*

National findings (DHHS Publication No. SMA 03-3836, NSDUH Series H-22). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Also available online: <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov>

Because of improvements and modifications to the 2002 NSDUH, estimates from the 2002 and 2003 surveys should not be compared with estimates from the 2001 or earlier versions of the survey to examine changes over time.

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