



## Empowering older adults: Enhancing addiction literacy to address unique vulnerabilities

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### Abstract

Addiction literacy equips older adults with the knowledge to navigate substance use risks amid unique challenges like polypharmacy and social isolation. With rising trends in cannabis use among this group, targeted education can promote safe practices and reduce preventable harms. By fostering open conversations and integrating addiction literacy into healthcare, providers can support informed decision-making.

**Key Words:** Health literacy; Addiction literacy; Ageing; Older adults; Drug use; Polypharmacy

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**Core Tip:** Addiction literacy equips older adults with the knowledge to navigate substance use risks amid unique challenges like polypharmacy and social isolation. With rising trends in cannabis use among this group, targeted education can promote safe practices and reduce preventable harms. By fostering open conversations and integrating addiction literacy into healthcare, providers can support informed decision-making.

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## TO THE EDITOR

Addiction literacy, a subdomain of health literacy, refers to the knowledge and skills necessary to understand, prevent, and manage substance use disorders and their associated risks[1,2]. As many countries experience a rapid demographic shift toward an ageing population, enhancing addiction literacy among older adults has never been more crucial.

In that sense, the study by Fang *et al*[3] captured our attention as it provides critical insights into the interplay between health literacy, social isolation, and psychological distress among older adults. Analyzing the dual challenge of frailty and social isolation, the authors emphasize the need to address both factors in order to mitigate adverse health outcomes. Among its key findings, the study indicates that social isolation is negatively associated with health literacy, which in turn is linked to psychological distress in this vulnerable group. Notably, health literacy was identified as a mediating factor between social isolation and psychological distress, underscoring its role in promoting mental well-being.

In this context, addiction literacy becomes especially important, as psychological distress is often, and wrongly, addressed through the use of alcohol, marijuana, and prescription drugs without proper medical supervision[4,5]. Such practices not only fail to resolve underlying issues but may also create and exacerbate health risks, particularly among older adults already dealing with frailty, polypharmacy and other risk factors. Building addiction literacy can empower this population to seek appropriate support and make informed decisions about substance use, contributing to overall health and well-being.

The concurrent use of prescription medications alongside substances like alcohol or cannabis increases the risk of adverse drug interactions, cognitive impairment, and accidents[6,7]. Alarming, recent trends show a significant rise in cannabis use among older adults, with studies highlighting an increase of marijuana use in those over 60 years in many regions of the world[8]. While often used for therapeutic purposes, such as pain management or insomnia, cannabis use in this group may exacerbate health risks, especially when combined with other medications.

Older adults may lack awareness of these risks due to inadequate addiction literacy, widespread misinformation and target campaigns that are often absent. This gap in addiction literacy may leave older adults ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of modern substance use trends and associated health risks.

To address this gap, targeted interventions are essential. Health education campaigns tailored for older populations can be delivered through community centers, primary care settings, and digital platforms. These campaigns should focus on: (1) Risk awareness: Educating about the potential interactions between commonly prescribed medications and substances such as alcohol, cannabis, or opioids; (2) Safe use practices: Providing guidance on the appropriate use of therapeutic substances like medical marijuana and encouraging discussions with healthcare providers. Notably, we highlight that, in most cases, “no use” is the safest practice; and (3) Destigmatization: Creating a non-judgmental environment for older adults to discuss substance use concerns and seek help.

Healthcare providers play a pivotal role in improving addiction literacy. Training clinicians to screen substance use with their older patients can be an important step in promoting informed decision-making. Integrating addiction literacy into routine health check-ups, along with the provision of easy-to-understand educational materials, can also have a meaningful impact.

Moreover, policymakers must invest in research to better understand substance use patterns and related health outcomes among older adults. Such evidence, as presented by Fang *et al*[3], can inform the design of interventions that are culturally appropriate and address the main factors that curb health and quality of life.

As we continue to grapple with the challenges of an ageing population, prioritizing addiction literacy among older adults is an important public health necessity. By equipping this vulnerable demographic with the knowledge and tools to make informed-and healthy-choices, we can enhance quality of life in this population and reduce the burden of preventable health complications.

## FOOTNOTES

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