

## Karen Telleen-Lawton: Senior Drug Abuse On the Rise

More than 2.5 million 50-somethings admitted using illegal drugs or taking prescriptions for nonmedical uses from 2002 to 2009



A senior couple enjoy a natural "high" at Yosemite National Park.



Baby boomers have been blamed for everything from overloading the public schools in the post-[World War II](#) era to the difficulty of employing millions of young adults in the 1960s. Now they're accused of driving a surge in senior drug abuse, from prescription and over-the-counter medications to illicit drugs. It looks like they're gunning to be guilty as charged.

More than 2.5 million 50-somethings admitted using illegal drugs or taking prescription drugs for nonmedical uses from 2002 to 2009 — triple the previous rate. This is reported as a new topic on the [National Institute of Health's website](#), called [Prescription and Illicit Drug Abuse](#).

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The prescription medications most commonly abused are the same for seniors as for all age groups: opioids (painkillers like [Codeine](#)), depressants such as [Valium](#) and stimulants such as [Ritalin](#).

The top four illegal drugs are marijuana, opioids (such as heroin), stimulants (such as cocaine) and hallucinogens (LSD). Marijuana is the most abused illegal drug among people age 50 or older. Although some states allow prescribing cannabis medicinally, it is still illegal to use in all circumstances under federal law. But now that polls show half of all Americans support legalizing marijuana, its future may change.

Some drug abuse is unintentional, the result of juggling multiple medications and physicians while suffering vision or memory loss. But oftentimes seniors combine prescription drugs with alcohol or illicit drugs to calm themselves or feel better. The consequences can be heightened for seniors compared with younger people.

As the body ages, it incompletely absorbs and breaks down medications. Moreover, even drugs taken properly may remain in the body longer than they would in a younger person. Aging brains may be at greater risk for harmful drug effects on memory or coordination.

Then there are drug combinations. Ingesting medications to treat medical conditions while simultaneously using illegal drugs can be very risky. For example, cocaine taken by a senior who already takes heart disease medications can cause even more severe heart problems. And because drugs compromise judgment, seniors may engage in harmful behaviors — exposing themselves to diseases they otherwise wouldn't risk. There is also a higher risk of accidents, falls and injuries among older adults who take illicit drugs.

Even marijuana, used for its relaxing properties, can have several negative effects, including slowed thinking and reaction time, and impaired memory and balance. It can also lead to paranoia and anxiety.

The upshot from this new trend is increased hospitalizations and visits to emergency rooms. But there are a few simple questions you can ask a loved one — or yourself — before this stage is reached. These are modified from the CAGE questionnaire (Cut, Annoyed, Guilty, Eye-opener) originally developed for spotting alcohol addiction:

- » Have you felt you ought to cut down on your drinking or drug use?
- » Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking or drug use?
- » Have you felt bad or guilty about your drinking or drug use?
- » Have you ever had a drink or used drugs first thing in the morning to steady your nerves, get rid of a hangover or get the day started (as an eye-opener)?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, it's time to get your highs from places like [Yosemite National Park](#), not from drugs — whatever your age.

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— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations spanning sustainability from the environment to finance, economics and justice issues. She is a fee-only financial advisor ([www.DecisivePath.com](http://www.DecisivePath.com)) and a freelance writer ([www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com)).*