Prescription drug misuse is associated with risks for overdose, dependence, and other health and social problems. National studies have found that young people have higher rates of prescription drug misuse (including tranquilizers, sedatives, narcotic pain medications, and stimulants) and concurrent alcohol-use disorders than older people. A recent national study found that 6.3 percent of women ages 18 to 25 and 2.1 percent of women ages 26 and older reported misusing prescription drugs in the preceding 30 days.

Prescription drug misuse also includes unintended noncompliance or risky use of prescribed drugs. Older women are more likely than men or younger women to be prescribed multiple prescription drugs, which may increase the potential for unintended misuse. Furthermore, older women are particularly sensitive to the physical effects of prescription drugs and alcohol, and consequently are more vulnerable to their use and misuse. With the aging of “baby boomers,” rates of nonmedical use of prescription drugs among older women and men are expected to double by 2020.

This report, based on combined data from the California Women’s Health Survey (CWHS) 2008 and 2009 (N = 9001), examined prescription drug misuse and alcohol consumption among women. The 2008 and 2009 CWHS asked women how many different prescription drugs they used per week in the past 12 months, by age group.

**Figure 1**

**Percentage of Women Using One or More Prescription Drugs Per Week in the Past 12 Months by Age, 2008-2009**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>51.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: California Women’s Health Survey, 2008-2009

**Public Health Message:**

These findings affirm the importance of prevention and interventions designed for women of all ages at increased risk for prescription drug misuse, including hazardous use of alcohol in combination with prescription drug use. Health providers, addiction treatment professionals, and other allied professionals should be trained and prepared to identify and address the needs of diverse women with co-occurring prescription drug misuse and alcohol-related problems.
Prescription Drug Use and Misuse Among Women: California Women’s Health Survey, 2008-2009

Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs
Office of Women’s and Perinatal Services
California Department of Public Health
Chronic Disease Surveillance and Research Branch

Prescription Drug Use

One-half of respondents (50.0 percent) did not use any medications at all, 17.2 percent used at least one prescription drug per week, 10.3 percent used two weekly, 7.2 percent used three weekly, and the remainder (15.3 percent) used four or more per week in the past 12 months. The percentage of women using at least one prescription drug per week increased significantly by age (P < .0001, Figure 1). Women with access to health insurance of any kind and women with higher socioeconomic status (250 percent or above the federal poverty level) were also more likely than uninsured women or lower income women to report prescription drug use (P < .05).

Prescription Drug Misuse

Prescription drug misuse was reported by 7.3 percent of respondents. Drug misuse differed significantly by age (P < .0001). Although older women were more likely to use multiple prescribed drugs, younger women were at greater risk for prescription drug misuse (Figure 2). Prescription drug misuse was also significantly greater among Hispanic women than White women (P < .05) and higher among lesbian or bisexual women than heterosexual women (P < .001).
Prescription drug use was strongly associated with heavier alcohol use. In the overall sample, 51.4 percent of respondents did not drink alcohol in the past 30 days (non-drinkers), 36.8 percent were moderate drinkers, and 11.8 percent engaged in binge drinking. However, binge drinking was significantly higher among respondents reporting prescription drug misuse (21.7 percent) than respondents who did not misuse prescription drugs (11.1 percent; \( P < .0001 \)).


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