Older Lesbian, Gay and Bi Adults Use Substances More Than Straight People

This finding is consistent with research about younger LGB people's substance use compared with their heterosexual counterparts.

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Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) adults age 50 and older have higher rates of nonmedical use of substances such as marijuana, tranquilizers and prescription opioids, compared with their heterosexual counterparts.

As described in the Journal of General Internal Medicine, investigators analyzed data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, which includes a representative sample of people in the United States. Looking specifically at the 2015 to 2017 surveys, the study authors compared rates of the reported use of certain substances during the past year between LGB people age 50 and older and heterosexual people in that age range.

The study cohort included 25,880 survey respondents, 2.5% of whom identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

"Our research confirms that a higher prevalence of substance use among lesbian, gay and bisexual adults can continue into later life," the study's lead author, Benjamin Han, MD, MPH, an assistant professor at New York University Langone Health, said in a press release. "Similar to LGBTQ adolescents and young adults, such prevalence may be related to stressors like discrimination and stigma based on sexual orientation in addition to stressors related to aging, including social isolation and age-related stigma."

The substances included in the analysis were marijuana, alcohol, cocaine, crystal meth, prescription opioids, sedatives (e.g., sleep medications), stimulants and tranquilizers (e.g., anti-anxiety medications, such as Xanax, which is in a drug class called benzodiazepines).

LGB people, compared with heterosexuals, the study authors found, were more likely to report nonmedical use of marijuana (13.9% of LGB people reported doing so in the last year, compared with 5.5% of heterosexuals), prescription tranquilizers (3.6% versus 1.1%) and prescription opioids (4.7% versus 2.3%).

After adjusting the data to account for various differences between the survey respondents, the

investigators found that LGB people age 50 and older, compared with their heterosexual peers, were 1.96 times more likely to report using marijuana during the past year, 1.33 times more likely to report alcohol use, 1.66 times more likely to report prescription opioid misuse and 2.39 times more likely to report tranquilizer misuse.

“These findings should inform prevention and harm reduction efforts in this community and should not be used to stigmatize such individuals. We hope that this new research, published during Pride Month, will remind people about the stressors many people still face in 2020 based on their sexual orientation,” said Joseph Palamar, PhD, MPH, the study’s senior author and an associate professor at NYU Langone Health. “Even though times are changing and things have been getting better for the LGBTQ community, older individuals in this population may still be affected from past experiences of intolerance.”

To read the study abstract, click here.

To read a press release about the study, click here.

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