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SAMPLE: Essay from *Salem Health: Abuse and Addiction*

Age and Addiction

Also known as: Craving; obsession; compulsion

A Hidden Problem

There is no age limit for addictions. Babies are born addicted to the illicit drugs and prescription medicines that their mothers abuse. Addiction to a wide range of substances and behaviors is endemic among teenagers and young adults. And, although not as widely recognized, older adults also suffer addictions.

A national survey revealed that between 2000 and 2008, admissions for addiction treatments for people 50 years and older increased by 70 percent while the overall population of that age group grew by only 21 percent. About 60 percent of those admissions were people seeking treatment for alcohol abuse; about 16 percent for heroin addiction; and about 11 percent for cocaine addiction.

A study released by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in 2010 showed that the aging of the baby-boom generation (1946–1964) has resulted in a sharp increase in the abuse of illicit drugs by adults over 50. Researchers concluded that the need for treatment services for addiction for Americans over 50 would double by 2020.

The scope of the problem of addiction among older adults is unknown largely because many cases go unreported. In addition, elders and their families often deny the problem. For example, family members might excuse an older relative's gambling addiction as a harmless hobby, or alcohol abuse as an entitlement after a long, hard life. Many older people rarely admit they have a problem. They rationalize that they are experienced and wise and able to "handle it." This is especially true for people addicted to prescription medications.

The symptoms of addiction are often less evident in older people than they are in younger people. For example, many older adults addicted to alcohol or drugs indulge at home, so they are less likely to drive and risk arrest while high. Many live alone, so few people notice their drinking or drug taking. And, because many are retired, there is no issue with missing work or underperforming on the job.

Many people, including health professionals, don't recognize addictions in older adults. Often addictions are mistaken for the so-called disease of old age, such as high blood pressure, dementia, stroke, Parkinson's, and sleep disorders. Moreover, most of the medical and psychological screening tests for addiction are designed for younger people and not always adapted to older adults.

Substances and Behaviors

Addictions in older adults are the same as those in younger people, using a working definition of *addiction* as "a physiological or psychological dependence on a substance or behavior to the extent that its withdrawal causes extreme distress to the user." But two substances, alcohol and prescription medications, and two behaviors, gambling and TV watching, appear to be particularly troublesome for older adults.

Alcohol is the drug most abused by older adults. In a survey of adults between 60 and 94, some 62 percent reported drinking alcohol regularly, and 13 percent admitted to a heavy use of

alcohol. In many cases, alcohol addiction leads to other problems. Older adults addicted to alcohol are three times more likely to already have or to develop another mental disorder.

Prescription medications rank as the second most abused substance among older adults. The most commonly abused medications are sedatives, antidepressants, sleeping pills, and pain relievers, especially the narcotic analgesics. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) reported that people over 65 account for about 33 percent of all medications prescribed yet make up only 13 percent of the U.S. population. According to the NIDA, some 18 percent of adults over 60 suffer from prescription drug abuse. Older adults take prescription medications three times more frequently than the general population and are more likely to disregard dosing directions, often choosing to self-medicate instead. To compound the problem, NIDA reported, in general, for some drugs, older adults receive prescriptions for higher doses and longer dosage than younger adults receive.

Gambling has become one of the most popular pastimes of older adults. In Ontario, 73 percent of participants in a survey said they had engaged in some form of gambling in the previous year. Studies have revealed that throughout North America, about 3.9 percent of all adult gamblers are addicted, about the same percentage as older gamblers. But considering that the older adult segment is the fastest growing population segment of gamblers, the actual number of addicted gamblers (known as pathological gamblers) is greater than ever before. Researchers in New Jersey found that 4 percent of gamblers over 55 are problem gamblers and 2 percent are pathological gamblers. Nearly 11 percent of patients over 65 in primary care facilities in Pennsylvania are at-risk gamblers. In Missouri, 4 percent of participants in the state's compulsive gamblers program are over 65.

TV watching can become an addiction, according to many mental health professionals. Some 97 percent of older adults watch TV regularly, more than any other age group. For many, especially those living alone or with limited mobility, TV is a companion and watching an activity that helps them cope with their problems. TV watching is considered an addiction when viewers can't bring themselves to turn off the TV at a chosen time; when they want to but can't watch less; when they complain about TV watching replacing other activities and taking up too much time; and when they are uneasy and experience actual withdrawal pangs when not watching TV for a time.

Age-Related Factors

Some adults carry an addiction into their later years. Most Baby Boomers today with an addiction to illicit drugs, for example, continue a pattern that began in the 1960s and '70s when heroin, cocaine, and other drugs were available and accepted. Although not many drug addicts, or alcoholics, live to old age because of the devastating physical effects of a lifelong addiction.

Other adults switch addictions when they get older. Studies of the chemistry of addiction are helping to explain why some people more than others become addicted. A seminal study prepared for the National Academy of Sciences in 1983 identified certain personality traits that can contribute to addiction. A person with an addictive personality, for example, might have been addicted to heroin but switched to prescription drugs later in life.

And still other adults become addicted only in their later years. Many elders turn to substances and behaviors that become addictions as a way to cope with growing older. The factors that contribute to addiction, at any age, are complex, but certain circumstances and elements are unique to older people.

As people reach their 60s, in general, they are more vulnerable to compulsive behaviors such as gambling. Older people experience much more loss than younger people do—loss of physical and mental capabilities; loss of older family members, of spouses, and of friends in the same age group; loss of earning power; and loss of status in society, especially following retirement and particularity in a society that reveres youth. Older adults deal with more serious medical conditions such as heart disease, Parkinson's, hearing loss, and dementia. Following retirement, many people are unsure of how to spend their time and are unaware of opportunities and community resources. Boredom and loneliness plague many older people.

The consequences of addiction are, in many cases, more serious for older people than for younger people. As the body ages, it processes substances differently than it did when it was younger. The level of alcohol or drug use, for example, considered light or moderate in the younger body is often dangerous to the organs and systems of the older body. Recovery from substance abuse takes longer in the older body. Older people also take more medications than younger people and risk serious problems when combining medications with alcohol or illicit drugs. And financial losses are harder to recoup for people on fixed incomes.

Addiction affects a person's self-esteem, coping skills, and relationships, which, when combined with the other losses common in later life, can lead to other serious mental illnesses. Clinical depression, although not specifically a disease of age, afflicts many older people. The link between clinical depression and addiction is well established.

Treatment for addictions in older people is much the same as it is for younger people, with the exception that most older addicts receive treatment for co-occurring disorders, two or more diseases present at the same time. On the positive side, health professionals report that once older adults enter treatment, they achieve greater success than any other age group does.