



Does Menopause

Make You More Susceptible
to Addiction?



SILVER RIDGE

A PREMIER PROGRAM BY PYRAMID HEALTHCARE

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Introduction

Menopause typically occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, with most women going through The Change around the age of 51. Menopause may bring with it all sorts of unpleasant physical and psychological changes, and women may turn to drugs or alcohol—or increase their use of these substances—in an attempt to cope with them.

While the biological function of menopause itself isn't necessarily a factor in developing a drug or alcohol addiction, it's not uncommon for women going through menopause to abuse drugs or alcohol for a variety of reasons. Whether drug abuse transitions to addiction is a matter of biology, genetics, culture and environment.



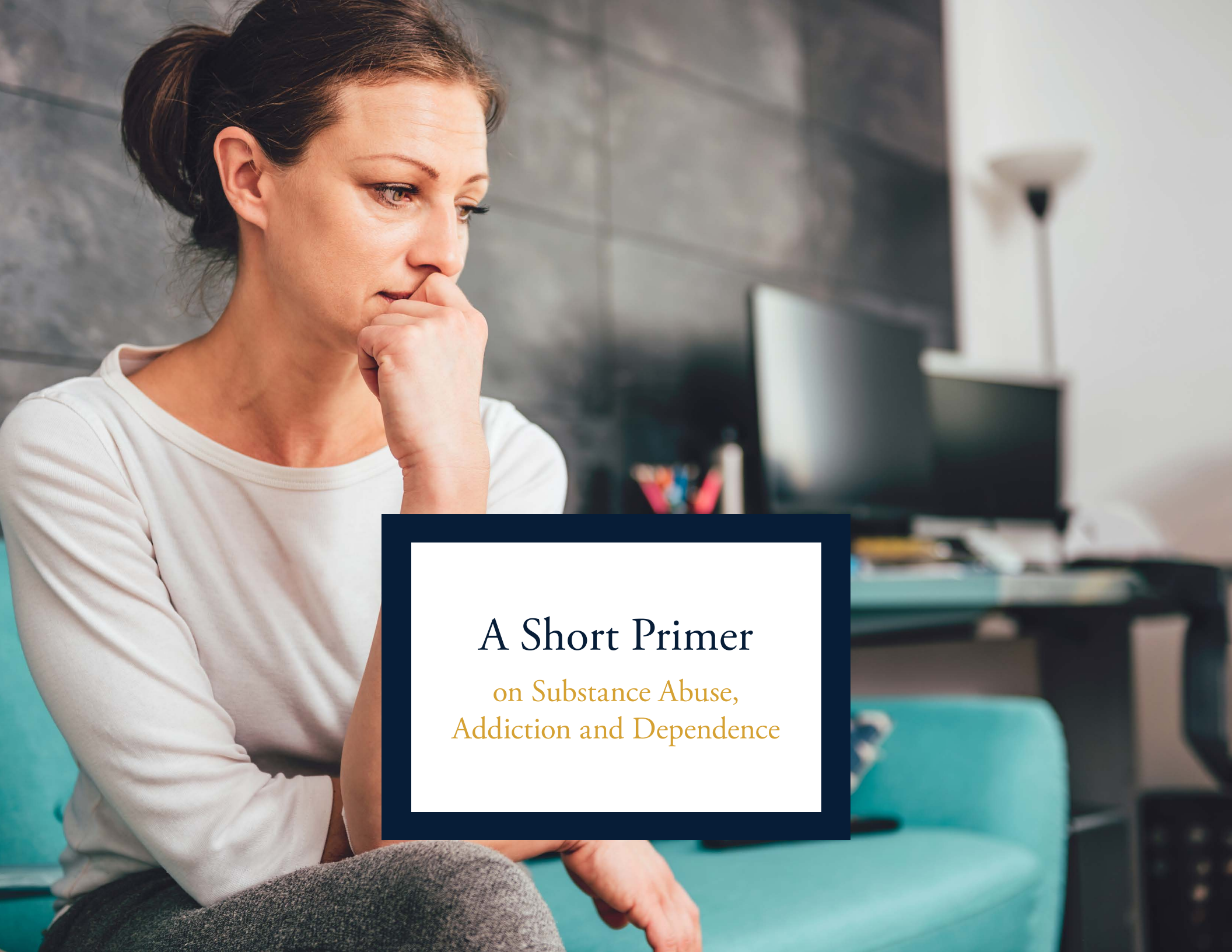
Dr. [Name]

Drugs Most
Commonly Abused
by Women in Menopause

Alcohol is the most commonly used drug in the U.S., and it's the most commonly abused by women in menopause. Prescription medications are also widely misused among older adults. According to an article published in the journal *Clinics in Geriatric Medicine*, 11 percent of women over the age of 50 report past-year non-medical use of prescription medications, including opioid painkillers, sedatives and tranquilizers.¹

The 2016 Monitoring the Future Survey reveals that illegal drugs are also commonly abused by older adults, with 18 percent of 50- to 55-year-olds reporting past-year illegal drug use and 11 percent reporting past-month use.² Marijuana is the most commonly abused illegal drug among this age group, with seven percent reporting past-month use and two percent reporting daily use.





A Short Primer
*on Substance Abuse,
Addiction and Dependence*

To understand how menopause affects your risk of substance abuse, addiction and dependence—and to know the best way to address problematic substance use—it's important to understand what substance abuse, addiction and dependence are. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they're very different. Clinically, they're all diagnosed under the umbrella term of "substance use disorder," which is then classified as mild, moderate or severe.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is the act of using drugs or alcohol in a way that causes problems in your life. These may be related to your physical or mental health, legal status, finances or relationships, or they may stem from the risks you take while using drugs or alcohol.

The most common form of substance abuse is binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined as drinking enough in two hours to bring your blood alcohol level up to .08 percent. For women, this is typically four drinks. For men, it's typically five.

Substance abuse is not the same as addiction or dependence, but it can lead to both of these.



Addiction

While addiction begins with the choice to abuse drugs or alcohol, once it develops, choice is no longer a factor.

Over time, chronic substance abuse causes changes in the physical structures and chemical functions of the brain, affecting its memory, reward and learning centers and affecting your thought and behavior patterns. As your brain makes ironclad connections between substance use and the pleasure it produces, you may begin to experience cravings. These are generally powerful enough to drive you to use your substance of choice despite the negative consequences it causes in your life.

Addiction is characterized by the inability to stop using drugs or alcohol even though your substance use is causing problems for you. You may want to quit, and you may try to quit, but if you're addicted, you'll likely find that you can't. The National Institute on Drug Abuse stresses that once an addiction develops, good intentions and willpower are rarely enough to recover for the long-term.³

Dependence

Dependence is a physical reliance on drugs or alcohol, characterized by withdrawal symptoms that set in when you stop using.

When you heavily abuse drugs or alcohol, your brain function changes in order to compensate for their presence. This produces tolerance, which means that in order to get the same effects, you need to use increasingly larger doses of drugs or alcohol. At some point, brain function may shift, and it will begin operating more comfortably when drugs or alcohol are present than when they're not. Then, when you stop using, normal brain function rebounds, and this causes the onset of withdrawal symptoms.





Symptoms of Menopause

and How They May Lead
to Substance Abuse

Symptoms of menopause are caused by changes in hormone levels, and they can range from mild to severe. It's common for women to self-medicate the symptoms of menopause with drugs or alcohol, increasing their risk of addiction and dependence. Following are some of the symptoms of menopause that may lead to drug and alcohol abuse.

Sleep Problems

Sleep problems, including insomnia, are a common symptom of menopause. Women who rely on sleeping pills like Ambien or Lunesta may develop an addiction to or dependence on these medications.

Some studies show that prescription non-benzodiazepine sleep aids carry a low risk of addiction. But according to an article published in the *British Journal of Clinical Pharmacology*, the World Health Organization warns that numerous cases of addiction to these medications have been reported in the U.S. and Europe. The WHO estimates that the rate of abuse and addiction associated with these sleeping pills is similar to that of benzodiazepines.⁴

Alcohol is also commonly used to combat sleep problems. Alcohol is a depressant, and it can help you fall asleep. However, the quality of that sleep will be decreased, and a lack of quality sleep can increase symptoms of depression and anxiety and contribute to other physical and mental health problems.



Physical Changes

Many women experience weight gain, facial hair growth or hair loss during menopause, and these can reduce their self-esteem and self-confidence. Feelings of low self-worth are commonly associated with substance abuse.

Mood Changes and Heightened Emotions

It's common for women going through menopause to lament the end of their youth and childbearing years, and many women worry about their waning sex drive and the strange things going on in their body. The mood swings and heightened emotions that may come with menopause can lead to self-medication with drugs or alcohol. Women may use these substances in an attempt to improve their mood or cope with unpleasant emotions.

Anxiety or Depression

Anxiety and depression often occur with menopause. Women in general are more likely than men to be diagnosed with these disorders. They're also more likely than men to be medicated for them for the long-term. Benzodiazepines are addictive and commonly misused medications prescribed to treat anxiety and panic disorders. These medications account for around 23 percent of all drugs prescribed to aging adults. While benzodiazepines are meant for short-term use, they're often prescribed for the long-term.

While older women are more likely than men to suffer from depression as they age, 30 percent of both men and women in older age groups report feeling depressed before drinking alcohol, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.⁵ It's common for people of all ages to self-medicate symptoms of mental illness with drugs or alcohol. In fact, about one-third of all people who have a mental illness, including anxiety and depression, also have a substance use disorder.





The Challenges of
Growing Older
and Where Substance Abuse
Fits In

Menopause is a glaring symptom of a simple fact of life: we all get older, if we're lucky. Along with the hormonal and emotional changes that accompany aging, women often use drugs or alcohol to cope with other issues that become more common around the age of menopause.

Workplace stress. By the time menopause rolls around, many women are deep into their careers, and the related stress can lead to substance abuse as a way to unwind and cope with the pressures of the job.

Empty nest syndrome. Once the children are grown and gone, many women lose a sense of purpose and may turn to drugs or alcohol to fill the void.

Divorce. The divorce rate among adults aged 50 and over has doubled since 1990. Divorce is a major life change that can leave women feeling angry and vulnerable. It can lead to feelings of isolation, sadness and worthlessness. Women may use drugs or alcohol to cope with the loss of their marriage.

Illness. Chronic illness—and chronic pain—can lead to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and a number of other negative emotions. Self-medicating a chronic illness, a loss of mobility or the emotions that come with these is common among older adults.



Retirement. Retirement can leave older adults feeling isolated, and it can cause feelings of uselessness and boredom. The loss of social support at work and the lack of structure that retirement may bring can lead to substance abuse as a way to fill the time and reduce negative emotions.

Ill or aging parents. As women enter the age of menopause, their parents are becoming elderly and may be struggling with their own health problems. Women often become caretakers to their ailing parents, and this can cause an enormous amount of stress, burnout, anxiety and depression, and substance abuse may grow worse as a result.



A woman with long, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes is sitting outdoors. She is wearing a white sleeveless top and has a ring on her finger. The background is a soft-focus green landscape. A dark blue rectangular box with a white interior is overlaid on the lower part of the image, containing text.

Substance Use Disorders

and Menopausal
Women's Health

Long-term substance abuse takes a major toll on your health and well-being, especially for women. According to the National Institutes of Health, women who are addicted to alcohol consume 60 percent less alcohol than men, but their rates of cardiomyopathy and myopathy resulting from drinking are roughly the same as men's.⁶

Due to biological factors, women's organs and brains are exposed to more of the toxic byproducts of alcohol than men's. Women who are heavy drinkers are more likely than men to develop cancer, heart disease, and alcoholic hepatitis. They're more likely to die of cirrhosis and lose cognitive function, and their risk of suicide is greater than men's.

Women are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol than men, and in general, substance abuse at an older age impacts physical and mental health more severely than it does at a younger age. According to the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, drugs and alcohol are involved in 11 percent of hospital admissions, 14 percent of emergency room visits, and 20 percent of psychiatric admissions among older adults.⁷

Marijuana, while it's widely regarded as safe to use, causes a four-fold increase in the risk of heart attack after the first hour of using, and these risks may be pronounced in older adults. Misusing benzodiazepines and non-benzo sleep aids can lead to a number of health problems as well, including a loss of coordination, memory problems and depression.



Strategies for Curbing
Your Substance Abuse



Not everyone who abuses drugs and alcohol becomes addicted or dependent. If you abuse drugs or alcohol, cutting down now can reduce your chances of addiction, dependence and other serious health problems down the road. Here are some tips for reducing your substance abuse that will also improve your health, well-being and quality of life.

Reduce your stress. Stress is a major trigger for substance abuse. While many people use drugs or alcohol to reduce stress, these substances actually reduce your body's ability to effectively cope with stress. Do what you can to reduce stressors in your life. Cope with the remaining stress in healthy ways, such as through deep-breathing exercises, meditation and yoga, physical activity or involving yourself in enjoyable, relaxing activities.

Exercise regularly. Regular exercise has been shown through a large body of research to not only reduce stress on the spot, but to also improve the way your body responds to it in the future. Regular exercise also reduces cravings, improves your mood, promotes better sleep and helps you control your weight.

Get help for anxiety or depression. If you suffer from anxiety or depression and use drugs or alcohol to relax or reduce symptoms, you're at a higher risk of developing an addiction and dependence. A combination of therapy and medication is highly effective for reducing symptoms of these and other mental illnesses. Getting help for anxiety and depression can dramatically improve your quality of life and help you reduce your reliance on drugs or alcohol for relief.

Find a hobby. Having purpose and meaning in life is an important deterrent for substance abuse. A healthy hobby promotes relaxation and well-being, and in many cases, it can replace substance abuse as a way to unwind and enjoy life.





Why Women in
Menopause Don't
Seek Help

for Addiction or Dependence

Fewer than 10 percent of all adults with a substance use disorder seek help for their addiction. Older people in general—and older women in particular—are even less likely than their younger counterparts to seek professional help for a drug or alcohol problem. But a moderate to severe substance use disorder—i.e., addiction and dependence—almost always requires professional help to overcome for the long-term.

Older adults often believe that their substance abuse is a private matter, and they may hide it from their friends, their children and even their spouse. In general, older adults view addiction with greater disapproval and attach a greater stigma to substance abuse problems than younger people

do, and they're less likely to admit to a problem and to seek help for it. Women of menopause age may think that by now they should have their issues under control, and they may be reluctant to get help out of shame or embarrassment.

Additionally, older women are less likely than their younger counterparts to be diagnosed with a substance use disorder by their physician. In many cases, the symptoms of substance abuse are attributed to other factors, including menopause symptoms and the usual aches, pains and existential crises of growing older.

A photograph of two women in conversation. The woman in the foreground, on the left, has long brown hair and is wearing a blue shirt. She is looking towards the right. The woman in the background, on the right, has long brown hair and is smiling. She is wearing a dark top. The background is a bright, indoor setting with large windows.

Treatment Works
to Improve Lives

If you find that you can't cut down or stop using drugs or alcohol even though they're causing problems in your life and even though you want to or have tried to stop, getting professional help for a substance use disorder can end your substance use for good and improve your life on all fronts.

A high-quality treatment program will take a holistic approach that includes both traditional therapies, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and family therapy, and complementary therapies like meditation, biofeedback and art therapy. Treatment is about more than quitting using. It's about delving into the issues that underlie your substance abuse, learning essential coping skills and reinventing yourself from the inside out.

Treatment therapies help you restore damaged relationships, find purpose and meaning in life and grow spiritually. They address mental illnesses like anxiety and depression, help you improve your overall physical health, and promote a variety of healthy lifestyle changes. Treatment helps you identify old, outdated beliefs about yourself and the world around you and replace these with healthier, more accurate and more relevant beliefs. Through treatment, you'll learn to identify self-destructive thought and behavior patterns and change your harmful attitudes, behaviors and ways of thinking.

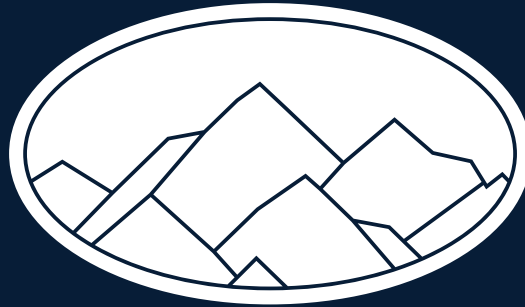


A high-quality treatment program will help you restore your mind, body and spirit to good health and improve your overall sense of well-being. Treatment works to restore lives, and it can work for you, too.



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Silver Ridge serves established midlife adults who need to retreat discreetly from their daily lives. Here, we provide the perfect setting to focus on the addictions compromising your relationships, your future and your legacy.

Every great legacy has a strong foundation. Build yours here.