

# LADIS bulletin

APRIL 2005

## Alcohol and older adults in outpatient addiction care in the Netherlands (1994-2003)

### In brief

- **18% of outpatient alcohol clients are aged 55 or above.**
- **Since 1994, the number of over 55s seeking alcohol treatment has risen by 68% (corrected for population aging).**
- **30% of over 55s seeking alcohol treatment are women (1994: 25%).**

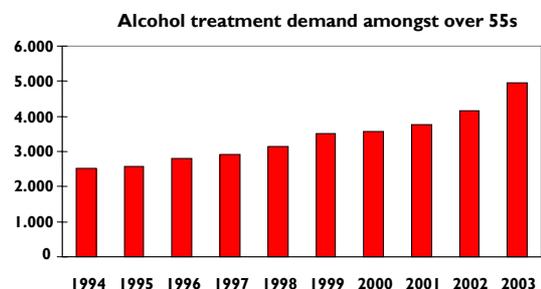
The organisation for Information Systems in Healthcare (SIVZ) has been assigned by the Dutch government to run the Dutch Alcohol and Drugs Information System (LADIS), and to process and report on the information derived from this database. Established in 1986, LADIS allows individual clients to be followed anonymously through time, making it possible to build a complete picture of treatment careers. LADIS is used to store nationwide data on individual outpatient addiction care clients. Trends are followed annually through the publication of key figures.

The database is also used for research, policy evaluation and benchmarking. Using data from LADIS, this bulletin will focus periodically on trends, themes and clients.

## Alcohol treatment demand and older adults

During recent years, there has been a marked increase in the demand for alcohol treatment at addiction care centres. This increase is particularly marked amongst clients over 55 years of age.

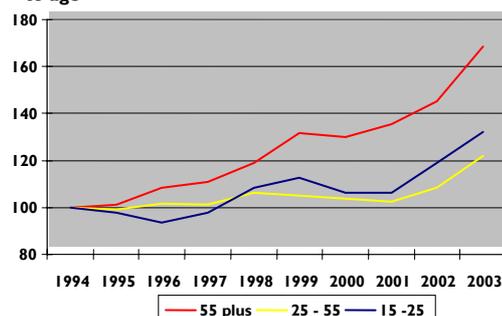
Figure 1



The number of over 55s seeking treatment has risen by 97%, to around 5,000 clients. This is a significant increase compared to the increase in overall treatment demand. Since 1994, overall treatment demand has risen by 35%, to around 27,000 clients.

In 1994, 12% of the clients with a primary alcohol problem were aged 55 years or older. By 2003, this figure had risen to 18%. This indicates that the proportion of older individuals within the overall group of alcohol clients is becoming increasingly greater.

Increase in treatment demand per 10,000 inhabitants according to age



This increase is partly due to population aging in the Netherlands. When a correction is included for population aging, an independent growth rate of **68%** remains.

In comparison, the treatment demand in the 15 to 25 year-old group increased by 32%, while in the 25 to 55 year-old group it grew by 22%.

In table 1, the increase in treatment demand amongst over 55 clients is broken down into subgroups according to age.

**Table 1 Alcohol treatment demand per 10,000 inhabitants according to age**

Age	1994	2001	2003	Increase since 1994 (%)
25- 55	24	25	30	22
55 – 60	16	23	26	58
60 – 65	11	13	17	64
65 – 70	6	8	9	63
70 +	1.7	2.2	2.3	35

The increase in treatment demand is probably due, in part, to the increased efforts made by the outpatient addiction services to reach alcohol clients.

About 27% of the older clients seeking treatment in 2003 were “new” clients. This means that they had never previously sought help for their alcohol problem.

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## Characteristics of alcohol problems in over 55s

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Table 2 provides an overview of the differences between the key features of older alcohol clients and those in other age categories.

**Table 2 Characteristics of alcohol clients seeking treatment in 2003**

Characteristic	Older clients 55+ (%)	Other clients 15 to 55 (%)
Daily use	75	69
Problem has persisted for more than 5 years	75	67
Secondary drugs	10	28
Main secondary drug	Medication	Cocaine
Psychiatric hospitalisation in the past	31	36
Been in contact with the law	24	49

On average, the frequency of alcohol use in the group of older clients (over 55s) is greater than in the group of under 55s. The problem also appears, on average, to have persisted longer in older clients before seeking treatment.

On the other hand, fewer clients seeking treatment appear to have a secondary addiction problem. In as far as secondary addiction is a problem, this generally involves the use of medication. Compared with the younger group of clients, older clients are less likely to have been in contact with the law and have received less psychiatric treatment.

However, it should be noted that the figures on clients’ psychiatric histories and on their previous contact with the law are not reliable since this information is missing for many clients.

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## Alcohol and women over 55s

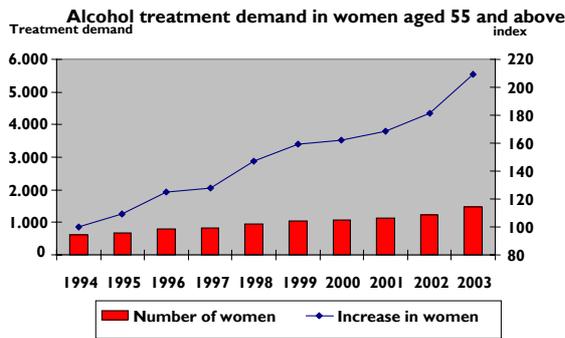
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The group of women over 55 seeking alcohol treatment has grown more rapidly than the corresponding male group, both in absolute and relative terms.

In 2003, 30% of the over 55s seeking treatment were female. In total, this equates to just under 1,500 women. In 1994, this figure was only 25% (over 600 women).

This difference represents an increase of 138%. When corrected for the increase in the number of women over 55 years of age, this equates to just over a two-fold increase (109%).

The relative increase in the number of men aged 55 or older and seeking alcohol treatment is 50%.



## Client characteristics

Table 3 provides an overview of the main differences between the characteristics of older clients and those in other age groups.

**Table 3 Characteristics of clients seeking alcohol treatment in 2003**

Characteristic	Older client 55+ (%)	Others 15 to 55 (%)
Average age	61	41
Dutch cultural background	95	88
Presenting via the healthcare system	29	18
Children in family	14	29
Higher education	21	12
Own home	89	74
Working	32	50
Female	30	25

The main differences are:

- Only a small number of those seeking alcohol treatment are from a non-Dutch cultural background, particularly in the over 55 group.
- Primary healthcare plays an important role in the referral of older clients.

- Family situations which involve children are less likely to occur with older clients. This difference is to be expected, since most of the older clients' children would have left home.
- Older clients are more likely to have had a higher education (university preparatory education (VWO), higher professional education (HBO) and higher) than the group of other alcohol clients.
- The number of women is relatively greater in the group of older clients.

## Conclusion

These figures relate to older people seeking alcohol-related treatment. Generally a correlation exists between the extent of the demand for treatment and problematic use in society. The increase in the demand for treatment over the past few years would therefore suggest that problematic alcohol use has also grown.

Alcohol problems in older citizens exist away from the eyes of the press and politics. The focus is usually on alcohol abuse and the associated social disturbances in young people. These figures indicate that there is an unsettling development taking place within the silence of growing older. The Netherlands is on the eve of facing an exceptionally difficult problem caused by population aging. The alcohol issue adds an extra dimension to this problem.

See also: <http://www.alcoholinfo.nl/ouderen>

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