

# Alcohol and older adults in outpatient addiction care in the Netherlands (1996-2005)

November 2006

## In brief

- 20% of outpatient alcohol clients are aged 55 or above.**
- Since 1996, the number of over 55s seeking alcohol treatment has risen by more than 90% (corrected for population ageing).**
- 32% of over 55s seeking alcohol treatment are women (under age 55: 24%).**

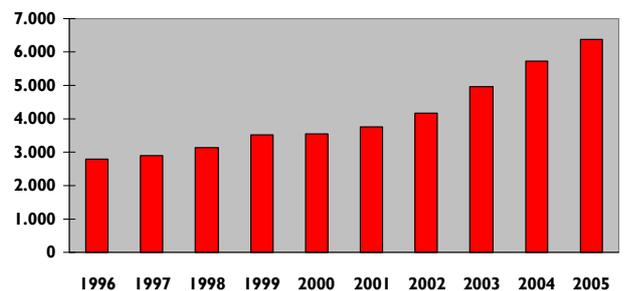
Since 2004, the organisation for Information Systems in Healthcare (SIVZ), manager of the National Alcohol and Drugs Information System (LADIS), has been cooperating with the 'Drank maakt meer kapot dan je lief is' [Drinking is more harmful than you think] campaign of the Netherlands Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (NIGZ) on the theme 'Alcohol and Older Adults'. Within this context, a more in-depth analysis of the Key Figures SIVZ distributes on the preceding year is provided annually.

This bulletin covers data on this theme from the past ten years.

## Alcohol treatment demand and older adults

During recent years, a sharp increase in demand for alcohol-related treatment has been observed at addiction care centres. This increase is particularly noticeable among clients over 55 years of age.

Figure I: Alcohol treatment demand 55+



While the number of over 55s seeking treatment was nearly 2,800 in 1996, this number has increased by nearly 130% to more than 6,300 in 2005. Three-quarters of this increase took place during the past 5 years. The rise among over 55s is significantly greater than the increase in the total alcohol-related treatment demand, which was 50%.

In 1996, 13% of the clients with a primary alcohol problem were aged 55 years or older. By 2005, this figure had risen to 20%. This indicates that the proportion of older individuals within the overall group of alcohol clients is becoming increasingly greater.

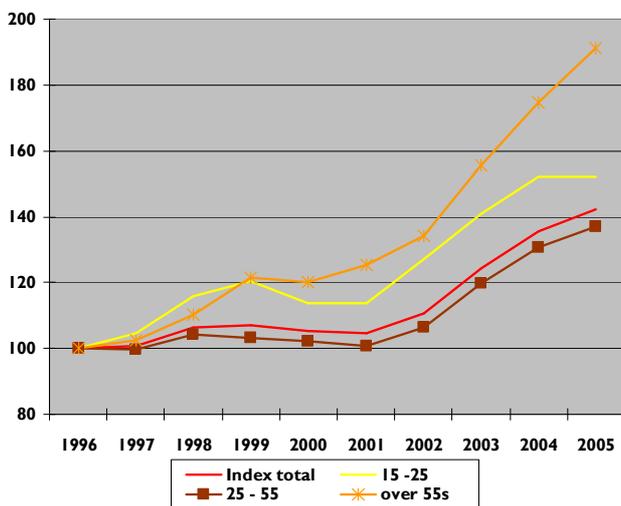
In Table I, the increase in treatment demand among clients older than 55 is broken down into age groups.

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

Age	1996	2000	2005
15 - 25	4.4	5.0	6.7
25 - 55	24.7	25.2	33.8
55 - 60	17.1	21.1	30.6
60 - 65	11.3	13.5	19.9
65 - 70	6.9	7.2	12.0
70 +	1.7	2.1	3.2
<b>Total 55 +</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>15.1</b>

The increase in treatment demand of over 55s can partly be attributed to the ageing Dutch population. After correction an independent growth rate of 91% remains. In comparison, treatment demand among clients under 55 years of age grew by only 39%.

**Figure 1: increase in treatment demand per 10,000 inhabitants according to age**



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 23% of the older clients seeking treatment in 2005 were “new” clients. This means that they had never previously sought help for their alcohol problem.

## Characteristics of alcohol problems in over 55s

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

**Table 2**  
Characteristics of alcohol clients seeking treatment in 2005

Characteristic	Clients over 55	Clients under 55
Daily use	77%	71%
Problem has persisted for more than 5 years	77%	70%
Secondary drugs	10%	28%
Main secondary drug	medication	cocaine
Psychiatric hospitalisation in the past	29%	34%
Been in contact with the law	29%	53%

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

On the other hand, fewer clients seeking treatment appear to have a secondary addiction problem. Insofar as secondary addiction is a problem, it 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.

## Alcohol and women over 55

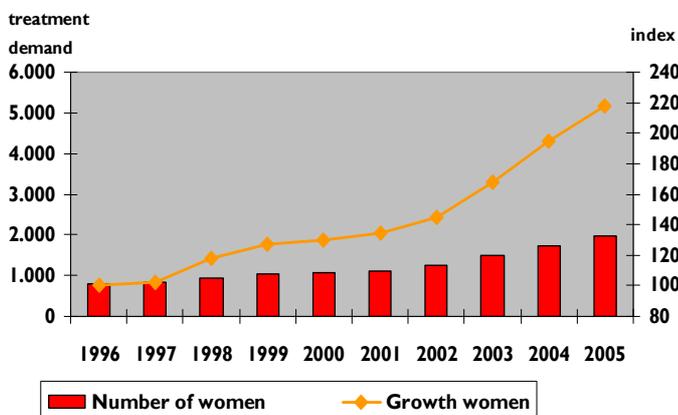
The group of women over 55 seeking alcohol treatment has grown more rapidly than the corresponding male group both in absolute and relative terms.

In 2005, 32% of the over 55s seeking treatment were female. In comparison, 24% were under the age of 55. In total, there were nearly 2,000 women. In 1996, this figure was only 28% (nearly 800 women). This difference represents an increase of 150%.

After correcting for the increase in the number of women over 55 years of age, this equates to an increase of 118%.

The relative increase in the number of men aged 55 years or older and seeking alcohol treatment was 'only' 75%.

**Figure 2: Alcohol treatment demand women over 55s**



## 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 2005

Characteristic	55+	55-
Average age	61 yrs	42 yrs
'Native' Dutch	94%	88%
Registration via the health care system	38%	28%
Children in family	15%	31%
Higher education	21%	12%
Own home	89%	75%
Working	32%	48%
Female	32%	25%

The main differences are:

- Only a small percentage of those seeking alcohol treatment are from ethnic minorities, particularly in the over 55 age group;
- Primary healthcare plays an important role in the referral of older clients;
- Family situations involving 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 a higher education and their own home;
- The number of women is relatively greater in the group of older clients.

## Conclusion

Generally speaking, there is a correlation between the changes in demand for treatment and fluctuations in the extent of the problem in society. This suggests that the alcohol problem among older clients has grown over the past few years.

The figures show that older clients are more apt to drink daily than younger people. They probably have more time and may also have more money to spend. The figures also show that they more often have their own home.

This is not surprising, since the 'baby boomers' are increasingly part of the over 55s.

Alcohol problems in older citizens are a hidden issue. In the press and in politics the focus is usually on alcohol abuse and the associated social disturbances in young people. These young people have something in common with the over 55s: a lot of leisure time, more money to spend (often with support from their parents, who let them 'loosen up with alcohol') and an increasingly greater drinking frequency. The generation between these two generations is often too busy with career and family.

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 ageing. The alcohol issue adds an extra dimension to this problem.

**DRANK**  
maakt meer kapot dan je lief is.

**NIGZ**  
De Bleek 13  
Postbus 500  
NL-3440 AM Woerden  
T (0348) 43 76 00  
F (0348) 43 76 66  
I [www.nigz.nl](http://www.nigz.nl)  
E [nigz@nigz.nl](mailto:nigz@nigz.nl)

**STICHTING IVZ**

Randhoeve 231  
Postbus 504  
3990 GH Houten  
Telefoon: (030) 6358220  
Fax: (030) 6358230  
E-mail: [info@sivz.nl](mailto:info@sivz.nl)  
Website: [www.sivz.nl](http://www.sivz.nl)

