



Alcohol and older adults in outpatient addiction care in the Netherlands (1997-2006)

September 2007

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 nearly 80% (corrected for population ageing). Under age 55: 35%.**
- **31% of over 55s seeking alcohol treatment are women (under age 55: 24%).**

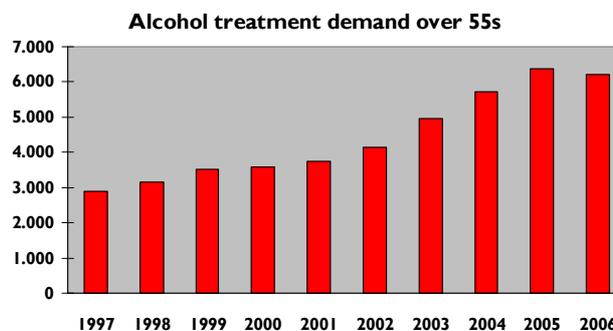
Since 2004, the organisation for Information Systems in Healthcare (SIVZ), manager of the National Alcohol and Drugs Information System (LADIS), has been cooperating with the 'Drank maakt meer kapot dan je lief is' [Drinking is more harmful than you think] campaign of the Netherlands Institute for Health 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. The data are derived from outpatient institutions for addiction care that are affiliated with the sector organisation, Mental Health Care (GGZ Nederland).

This bulletin covers data on this theme from the past 10 years.

This bulletin is a supplement to the key figures for 2006.

Alcohol treatment demand and older adults

During recent years, a steady 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.



While the number of over 55s seeking treatment was approximately 2,900 in 1997, this number has increased by 114% to more than 6,200 in 2006. Nearly two-thirds 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 45%.

In 1997, 13% of the clients with a primary alcohol problem were aged 55 years or older. By 2006, 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.

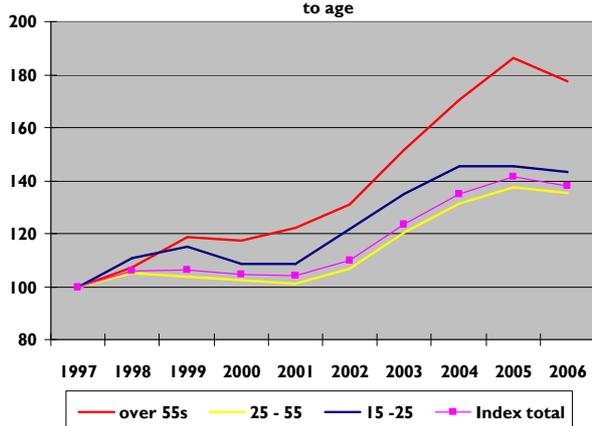
In Table 1, the increase in treatment demand among clients older than 55 is broken down into age groups.

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

Age	1997	2001	2006
15 – 25	4.6	5.0	6.6
25 – 55	24.6	24.9	33.3
55 – 60	18.4	23.0	27.3
60 – 65	11.2	12.5	21.6
65 – 70	6.8	7.8	11.1
70 +	1.7	2.2	3.1
Total 55 +	8.1	9.9	14.4

The increase in treatment demand of over 55s can partly be attributed to the ageing Dutch population. After correction, an independent growth rate of 78% remains. In comparison, treatment demand among clients under 55 years of age grew by only 35%.

Increase 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 22% of the older clients seeking treatment in 2006 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 2006

Characteristic	Clients over 55	Clients under 55
Daily use	75%	68%
Problem has persisted for more than 5 years	78%	69%
Secondary drugs	10%	32%
Main secondary drug	medication	cocaine
Psychiatric hospitalisation in the past	32%	36%
Been in contact with the law	30%	55%

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. If they do have a secondary addiction problem, it is usually medication. Compared with the younger group of clients, older clients are less likely to have been in contact with the law and have had fewer psychiatric admissions.

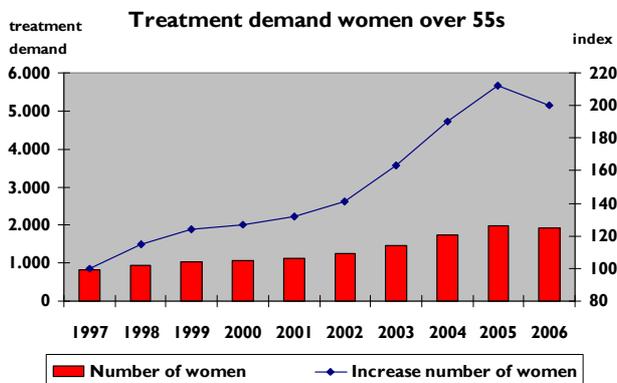
Alcohol and women over 55

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 2006, nearly one out of three (31%) of the over 55s seeking treatment were female. In comparison, nearly one out of four (24%) were under the age of 55. In total, there were more than 1,900 women. In 1997, this figure was only 28% (about 800 women). The number of women increased by 133%, more than double the amount.

After correcting for the increase in the number of women aged 55 or older, this is equivalent to double the amount.

The relative increase in the number of men aged 55 years or older and seeking alcohol treatment was 'only' 64%.



Age category 60-65 years

Compared with the figures on alcohol and older adults for 2005, there was a slight decline (average of 2%) across the board, both under 55s and over 55s, in the number of clients seeking assistance for alcohol treatment. This is partly due to a campaign at a number of centres to clear client files during this period.

The only major exception to this trend is in the 60 – 65 age category, where the number of clients seeking alcohol treatment has been increasing, and by more than 10%. This is not surprising since the 'baby boomers' are at the core of this age category.

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 2006

Characteristic	55+	55-
Average age	61 yrs	42 yrs
'Native' Dutch	94%	88%
Registration via health care system	39%	28%
Children in family	20%	31%
Higher education	21%	12%
Own home	89%	75%
Working	32%	48%
Female	31%	24%

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 health care plays an important role in the referral of older clients;
- Family situations involving children are less likely to occur with older clients. (The difference is to be expected, since most of the older clients' children would have left home in this phase). Compared to 2005, there is an increase in the number of over 55s with children (from 15 to 20%);
- 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.

This group of older clients is catching up, making the picture in the Netherlands increasingly gloomy: while people at high risk of alcoholism used to be in the prime of life (25 to 55 years), the problem has now extended to the higher age categories. Aside from the unrest about increasing alcohol abuse among youth, which is also increasing in the next age category (see Table 1), our country is concerned about a new group of problematic drinkers: older adults.

The figures show that older adults are more apt to drink daily than younger people. They probably have more time (see also the increase starting at 60 years) and may also have more money to spend. They have something in common with present-day youth: 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.

These figures indicate that there is an unsettling development taking place with the ageing of the population. When asked for its reaction to these figures, GGZ Nederland, the sector organisation of addiction care centres, replied: "We already saw it coming, and are working on expanding facilities for seniors. Centres are focusing on providing greater low-threshold assistance such as internet. But we believe that a connection with various forms of self-help is also important, since this category of clients is at greater risk of becoming lonely and losing its ties with society."

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