



## At a glance

- The number of people over 55 years old requesting help with an alcohol problem has risen by 130% (89% when corrected for the ageing population) since 1998.
- The percentage of alcohol clients aged 55 and older rose from 14% to 22% in the same period.
- The increase has been sharpest in the last 5 years.
- The percentage of women continues to grow.
- Increasing numbers of referrals for addiction care are coming via healthcare agencies.

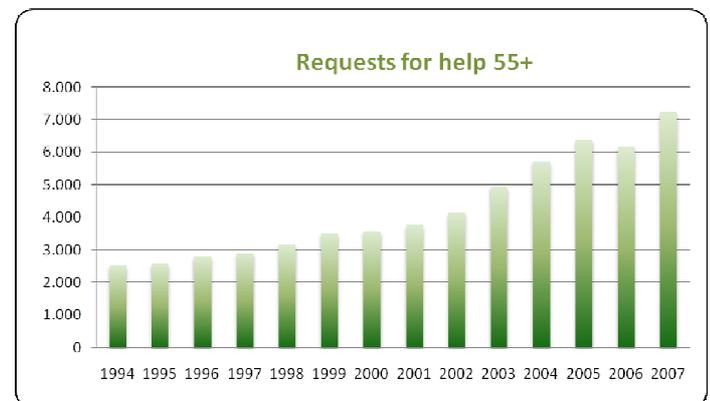
Every year, a detailed analysis is made of the Key Figures issued by the Organisation for Information Systems in Care (the *Stichting Informatievoorziening Zorg*, or IVZ), which administers the National Alcohol and Drugs Information System (the *Landelijk Alcohol en Drugs Informatiesysteem*, or LADIS). The figures are supplied by addiction care institutions. In conjunction with the "*Drank maakt meer kapot dan je lief is*" ("Drink: it's not just you that gets wrecked") alcohol awareness campaign, which has been run by the Trimbos Institute since 2008, a factsheet is published each year on the theme of alcohol and the elderly.

This factsheet gives an overview of data from LADIS concerning alcohol and the elderly over the last ten years, supplemented with data from other investigations and studies.

## Alcohol and the elderly – requests for help

In recent years the level of requests for help received by addiction care institutions from people with an alcohol problem has risen sharply. Among people over 55 years, however, this rise has been much steeper.

In 2007, 22% of clients with alcohol as their primary problem were 55 years old or older. This indicates that the percentage of older people in addiction care is steadily growing.



Whereas the number of individuals of 55 years or older requesting help in 1998 was 3,154, by 2007 this number had risen to 7,241: an increase of 130% in ten years. This increase in requests for help among people over 55 can partly be attributed to the ageing of the Dutch population. As the proportion of older people in Dutch society rises, it follows that the percentage of older people in addiction care will also increase. If we adjust the growth figure for the ageing factor, however, an autonomous growth of 89% still remains. The growth in people over 55 is greater than the increase in younger clients.

The increase of younger clients amounts to just 37%: a considerable difference.

Visits of people over 55 to GPs and specialists that are not alcohol-related only show slight fluctuations (Statistics Netherlands, 2009). There are no indications of the dramatic rise seen in addiction care.

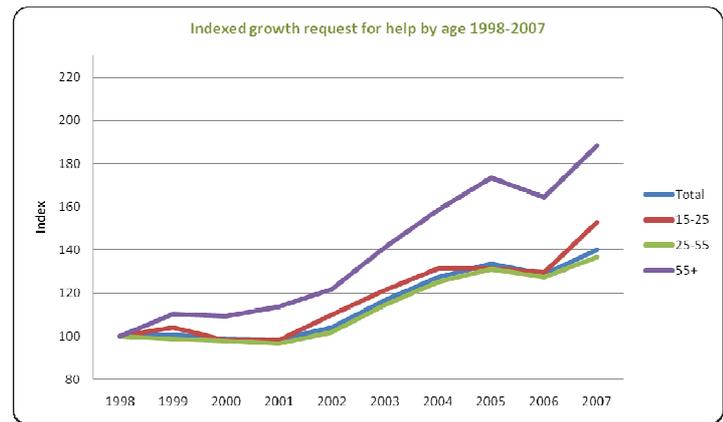
Table 1 shows the increase in clients divided by age category per 10,000 members of the same age category, and the rise in percentage terms from 1998 to 2007.

**Table 1. Increase in alcohol clients per 10,000 inhabitants**

Age	1998	2007	Rise in %
15 – 25	5.1	7.8	53%
25 – 55	25.8	35.3	37%
55 – 60	19.8	31.9	61%
60 – 65	11.7	23.9	104%
65 – 70	7.5	12.7	67%
70+	1.8	3.5	94%
Total 55+	8.7	16.4	89%

The problem is still the greatest in the 25 – 55 age category. Within this group, 35 people per 10,000 inhabitants make requests for help, as opposed to 16 per 10,000 among people over 55. The number of younger people seeking help is also rising steeply, but the rate is much lower in relative terms at 8 per 10,000 inhabitants. Looking at the growth in all alcohol clients from 2006 to 2007, 37% of this growth is accounted for by people over 55.

A steady increase can be seen from 1998 to 2002 in the number of older people in addiction care. However, three quarters of this increase took place in the last 5 years. In 2007 alone, the growth in older clients in relation to the previous year amounted to 15% (adjusted for the ageing of the population).



### Characteristics of clients aged 55+

Of the older people who sought contact in 2007, 24% had never before asked for help with their alcohol problems, and came into contact with addiction care for the first time in that year. The number of clients aged 55 and older indicating that they have had a problem for longer than 10 years is rising. In addition, a group who had previously had problems have remained in or returned to care.

Furthermore, the percentage of women is higher among older people asking for help than among younger categories. The percentage of divorced and widowed people asking for help is also higher among older people, and they more often have their own homes.

**Table 2. Characteristics of people asking for help with alcohol problems in 2007**

Characteristic	55-	55+
Men	75%	69%
Women	25%	31%
Single	51%	20%
Married	21%	35%
Divorced	16%	27%
Widowed	1%	8%
Own home	70%	88%

We can see changes in the characteristics of older clients over the last 10 years:

- The number of single people has grown.

- Referrals via frontline healthcare agencies have almost doubled, while fewer people are coming forward directly on their own initiative.
- The educational level of older people asking for help with alcohol problems is rising.
- More people in employment are presenting themselves for addiction care.

The doubling of referrals via frontline healthcare services can partly be explained by the fact that many addiction care agencies no longer treat clients without a letter of referral.

**Table 3. Changes among alcohol clients aged 55+ between 1998 and 2007**

Characteristic	1998	2007
Average age	61.1 years	60 yrs
Indigenous Dutch origin	95%	94%
Clients reporting directly	43%	28%
Referral via healthcare agency	26%	45%
Primary school education	44%	33%
Higher education	17%	24%
Own home	93%	88%
Employed	28%	30%
Has not worked in last 5 years	49%	33%
Single	44%	50%
Women	30%	31%

It is noteworthy that for many years the majority of the older clients have been of indigenous Dutch origin. Only a very small proportion of older people seeking help have another ethnicity.

Among single older people in the Netherlands, 20% have psychiatric problems and 14% have poor physical health. Among people with a partner this figure is only 8% (Statistics Netherlands, 2009).

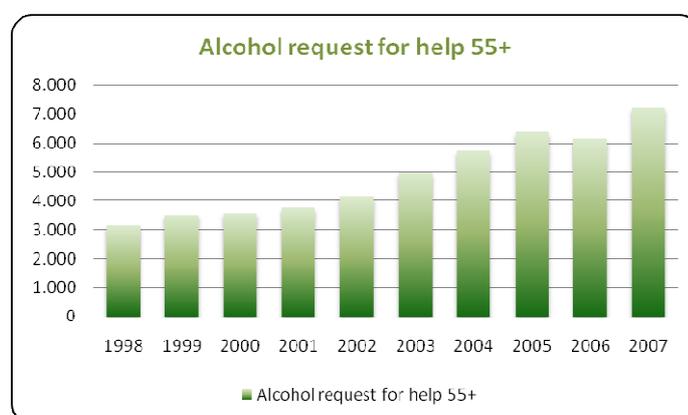
### Alcohol and women aged 55+

In 2007, one in four (24%) of younger clients asking for help with an alcohol problem were women. Among older people the number was higher: one in three (31%) were women, a total of 2,259 individuals. In 1998 this figure was only 935.

The percentage growth adjusted for the growth in the number of women in the population aged 55+ comes out at 100%, a doubling in numbers. The number of women over 55 asking for help with an alcohol problem is growing relatively faster than the number of men in this age group.

Adjusted for the ageing of the population, the growth among men is 'only' 78%.

The proportion of women receiving help via the internet is higher than in 'normal' channels. Figures on this will become available in the coming years, and will probably show the proportion of older women as even higher (IVZ, 2009).



### Characteristics of problems among people aged 55+ in 2007

In 2007 it appeared that people aged 55+ drank daily more often than younger people. The average frequency of alcohol use among older people was also higher. In addition, on average the older group had had an alcohol problem for a longer period. Set against this, a secondary addiction played a role for fewer of the people asking for help. Where there was a secondary addiction, for more than half of the people it concerned prescription drugs, particularly benzodiazepine.

**Table 4.**  
**Characteristics of problems among people asking for help with an alcohol problem in 2007**

Characteristic	55-	55+
Daily use	66%	75%
Duration of problem longer than 5 years	70%	80%
Use of other substance	32%	11%
Main other substance	Cocaine Cannabis	Prescription drugs

Other sources also show that alcohol use among older people can have problematic consequences. For example, 1,200 people aged 55+ were treated at a hospital Accident & Emergency department as a result of a fall caused by excessive alcohol use. (Knowledge Centre of Psychiatry in the Elderly, Trimbos Institute, Consumers and Safety, 2009).

## Conclusion

There is usually a direct link between requests for help and fluctuations in the extent of a problem in society. It can therefore also be concluded that alcohol problems among older people have increased, and are continuing to increase. Older people are 'catching up' in this sense, indicating an increasingly gloomy picture in the Netherlands. Although the problem is still the greatest in the 25 to 55 age category, requests for help from older people are rising at a much faster rate. A striking element of this is the rise in the number of clients aged 55+ who have had an alcohol problem for longer than 10 years.

The figures show that older people have more of a tendency to drink daily than their younger counterparts. They probably have more time to spend, and possibly more money. That is not so surprising, because increasing numbers of 'baby-boomers' now form a part of the 55-plus age group.

In view of the general ageing of the population, the figures reproduced here have been painting a disturbing picture for some years now. It is therefore advisable to expand services for older people, including the preventative area, with information specifically targeted at older people and training for professionals who regularly come into contact with this group.

Only a fraction of the total number of problem drinkers seek help. When services are improved or made more accessible, the number of people receiving care grows.

A number of addiction care agencies have already expanded their services to older people. These could serve as an example for other agencies in the Netherlands.

Contacts with self-help groups also have an important function. Changes in living circumstances, such as the loss of work, partners or friends, play a greater role among older people than with those who are younger. In addition to offering help, self-help groups can also counteract isolation and reduce loneliness.

### Supplementary information:

Statistics Netherlands, Key Figures 2008.

Statistics Netherlands Web Magazine: Older People Without a Partner Have Greater Health Risk. 2009.

Knowledge Centre of Psychiatry in the Elderly, Trimbos Institute: Consumers and Safety; Literature Study on Older People, Alcohol and Falls. 2009.



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