

Substance use and help seeking as coping behaviors among parents and unpaid caregivers of adults in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background

Parenting and caregiving responsibilities and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic are associated with adverse mental health symptoms. Substance use may be a negative coping strategy among caregivers. This study examined substance use initiation/increase, use of substances to cope with stress, and willingness to seek help among: (i) parents only, (ii) unpaid caregivers of adults only, and (iii) parent-caregivers (i.e., the “sandwich generation” or those who are both parents and unpaid caregivers).

Methods

Data were analyzed for 10,444 respondents across Waves 5 (December 2020) and 6 (February-March 2021) of the COVID-19 Outbreak Public Evaluation (COPE). Respondents completed questions on substance use initiation/increase and use in the past 30 days to cope and their willingness to seek help.

Results

Overall, 42.6% of respondents reported parenting and/or caregiving roles. In comparison to non-caregivers, parents, caregivers of adults, and parent-caregivers had higher odds of reporting new or increased use of substances to cope with stress or emotions [parent aOR: 1.87 (1.43-2.43); adult caregiver aOR: 2.04 (1.60-2.60); parent-caregiver aOR: 10.02 (8.24-12.10)]. Parent-caregivers had over six times the adjusted odds of using other drugs (i.e., cocaine, methamphetamine, opioids, or benzodiazepines) compared to non-caregivers in the past 30 days. More than 75% of all caregivers reported willingness to seek help.

Conclusions

Caregivers, particularly the sandwich generation, reported higher odds of substance use as a coping strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to respite care, telemedicine, and screening and intervention for risk related to substance use disorders are important to provide much needed support to families and caregivers.

Public health or related research Social and behavioral sciences

