

Alcohol Use and Misuse: Older Adults



- As people age, they become more sensitive to alcohol's effects. The same amount of alcohol can have a greater effect on an older person than on someone who is younger.
- Heavy drinking can make some health problems worse, and sometimes trouble with alcohol can be mistaken for other conditions related to aging.
- Mixing alcohol with many prescription and over-the-counter medications can be dangerous.
- Older adults who have concerns about their drinking should talk to their doctor. A doctor can help determine if additional help is needed.

Older adults can experience a variety of problems from drinking alcohol, especially those who:

- Have health problems
- Drink heavily
- Take certain medications

There are special considerations facing older adults who drink, including:

Increased Sensitivity To Alcohol

As people age, they may become more sensitive to alcohol's effects. The same amount of alcohol can have a greater effect on an older person than on someone who is younger. Older women are more sensitive than older men to the effects of alcohol. Over time, someone whose drinking habits haven't changed may find she or he has a problem.

Increased Health Problems

Heavy drinking can worsen some health problems that are common in older adults. These include:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Congestive heart failure
- Liver problems
- Osteoporosis
- Memory problems
- Mood disorders

Sometimes trouble with alcohol in older people is mistaken for other conditions related to aging, for example, a problem with balance. Older adults with concerns should talk with their doctor or other healthcare worker about how alcohol can affect their health.

Bad Interactions With Medications

Many prescription and over-the-counter medications, as well as herbal remedies can be dangerous or even deadly when mixed with alcohol. Medications that can interact badly with alcohol include:

- Aspirin
- Acetaminophen
- Cold and allergy medicine
- Cough syrup
- Sleeping pills
- Pain medication
- Anxiety or depression medicine



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There May Be Reasons To Stop Drinking

Some reasons may include:

- To be healthy by keeping high blood sugar (diabetes) under control
- To lower blood pressure
- To keep one's liver working right
- To avoid hurting anyone by driving after drinking
- To prevent falling and hurting oneself
- To stop feeling sleepy or sick the morning after drinking
- To enjoy life again
- To stop feeling embarrassed about one's behavior when drinking

Some people can cut back on their drinking. Some people need to stop drinking altogether. Making a change in one's drinking habits can be hard. If a person does not reach their goal the first time, they should be encouraged to try again; ask family and friends for help; and talk to their doctor if they are having trouble quitting.

Help Is Available

If an older adult thinks they have a drinking problem, here are some things they can do:

- Find a support group for older adults with alcohol problems
- Talk to a healthcare professional like a doctor. Ask the doctor about medicines that might help
- Contact the local health department or social services agencies for help
- Talk to a trained counselor who knows about alcohol problems in older adults
- Choose individual, group, or family therapy, depending on what works for you
- Join a 12-step program like AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) that offers support and programs for people who want to quit drinking

Tips To Help Cut Back On Or Stop Drinking

- Remove alcohol from the home
- Say "no thanks" or "I'll have something else instead" when offered a drink
- Avoid drinking when angry or upset or when having a bad day
- Avoid people, places, and times of day that may trigger drinking. Plan what to do if tempted to drink.
- Call a doctor or other healthcare worker, the town senior center, or the local Area Agency on Aging to find the names of places where help is available
- Use the time and money spent on drinking to do something enjoyable. Remember to stay healthy for the fun things in life.

Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental
Health and Addiction Services
<https://portal.ct.gov/DMHAS>

24/7 Access Line
1.800.563.4086

United Way 211
www.211ct.org
211 or 1.800.203.1234

National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental
Health Services Administration
www.samhsa.gov