

Older Adults and Alcohol



You Can Get Help



National Institute on Aging





What's Inside?

Read this booklet to learn about alcohol and aging. Share this booklet with your friends and family. Use this booklet to start talking about how drinking may be affecting your life.

Family support can often make a big difference.

Don't miss the special section on page 13 to learn how friends and family can help.

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Get the Facts About Aging and Alcohol

You can become more sensitive to alcohol as you get older.

“I’ll be 68 in March. I’ve had a beer or two every night since I was in my mid-30s. Never had a problem until a few months ago. Lately, when I drink my beer, I feel a little tipsy. My son says I am slurring my words. What’s going on?”

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. Over time, someone whose drinking habits haven’t changed may find she or he has a problem.



Heavy drinking can make some health problems worse.

“I take medicine to keep my diabetes under control. I only drink a shot of whiskey a night. Now my doctor says I need to stop drinking. It isn’t going to be easy, but I guess it’s something I need to do to stay healthy.”

Heavy drinking can make some health problems worse. It is important to talk to your doctor if you have problems like high blood sugar (diabetes). Heavy drinking can also cause health problems such as weak bones (osteoporosis).

Older adults are more likely to have health problems that can be made worse by alcohol. Some of these health problems are:

- Stroke
 - High blood pressure
 - Memory loss
 - Mood disorders
-

Talk with your doctor or other health care worker about how alcohol can affect your health.

Medicines and alcohol don't mix.

“I was taking strong medicine for a bad cold. When I had my usual glass of wine at dinner, I felt dizzy. That’s never happened before.”

Many prescription, over-the-counter, and herbal remedies can be dangerous or even deadly when mixed with alcohol. Always ask your doctor or pharmacist if you can safely drink alcohol. Read the labels on all of your medicines. Some labels say, “Do not use with alcohol.”

Did you know?

- Taking aspirin and drinking alcohol can raise the chance of bleeding in your stomach.
 - You can get very sleepy if you drink alcohol and take cold and allergy medicines.
 - Some cough syrups have a high amount of alcohol in them.
 - Drinking alcohol while taking some sleeping pills, pain pills, or anxiety or depression medicine can be very dangerous.
 - You can hurt your liver if you drink and take a lot of painkillers that have the word “acetaminophen” on the label. Always check the warning labels.
-





There may be many reasons to stop drinking.

Check off any reasons that sound true for you.

I would like to quit drinking because:

- ☐ I want to be healthy by keeping my high blood sugar (diabetes) under control.
 - ☐ I want to lower my blood pressure.
 - ☐ I want to keep my liver working right.
 - ☐ I don't want to hurt anyone by driving after I've been drinking.
 - ☐ I don't want to fall and hurt myself.
 - ☐ I'm tired of feeling sleepy or sick the morning after I drink.
 - ☐ I want to enjoy the things I used to do.
 - ☐ I want to stop feeling embarrassed about how I act when drinking.
 - ☐ List other reasons here:
-

Some people can cut back on their drinking. Some people need to stop drinking altogether. Making a change in your drinking habits can be hard. Do not give up! If you do not reach your goal the first time, try again.

Ask your family and friends for help. Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble quitting.
Get the help you need.



There Is Help

If you think you have a drinking problem, here are some things you can do:

- Find a support group for older adults with alcohol problems.
- Talk to a health care professional like your doctor. Ask about medicines that might help.
- Visit a trained counselor who knows about alcohol problems and how they affect older adults.
- Choose individual, group, or family therapy, depending on what works for you.
- Join a 12-step program such as AA, which is short for Alcoholics Anonymous. AA groups offer support and have programs for people who want to quit drinking.



Check off the tips you will try:

- ☐ Remove alcohol from your home.
- ☐ When you drink, sip slowly. Eat food when you are drinking—don't drink on an empty stomach.
- ☐ Politely say “no thanks” or “I'll have a soda instead” when offered a drink.
- ☐ Avoid drinking when you are angry or upset or have had a bad day.
- ☐ Stay away from people who drink a lot and the places where you used to drink. Plan what you will do if you are tempted to drink.
- ☐ Call your doctor or other healthcare worker, the senior center near you, or your local Area Agency on Aging to find the names of places where you can get help.
- ☐ Reward yourself for not drinking! Use the time and money spent on drinking to do something you enjoy.

Have you been a heavy drinker for years or do you drink often? It is important to talk to your doctor before making a change in your drinking. There may be some side effects from a sudden change. Medicine can help.

Your Questions Answered

Q: What's too much for a person over age 65 to drink each week? Each day?

A: Everyone is different. If you are healthy and 65 years or older, you should not have more than 7 drinks in a week. Don't have more than 3 drinks on any given day.

Do you have a health problem? Are you taking certain medicines? You may need to drink less or not drink at all. Talk to your doctor.

Q: What counts as one drink?

A: One drink is equal to one of the following:



One 12-ounce can or bottle of regular beer, ale, or wine cooler



One 8- or 9-ounce can or bottle of malt liquor



One 5-ounce glass of red or white wine



One 1.5-ounce shot glass of hard liquor (spirits). The label will say 80 proof or less. Spirits include whiskey, gin, vodka, rum, and other hard liquors.

Drinks may be stronger than you think.
Some mixed drinks may have more than one
1.5-ounce shot of liquor in them.

Q: My neighbor was never much of a drinker, but since he retired I see him sitting in the backyard every day, drinking. Is it really possible for someone to start to have a drinking problem later in life?

A: Some adults do develop a drinking problem when they get older. Health worries, boredom after retirement, or the death of friends and loved ones are some of the reasons why older people start drinking. Feeling tense or depressed can also sometimes be a trigger for drinking.

Q: I am worried that my cousin Ruby has a drinking problem. We play cards every week and she drinks through most of the game. The other women in our group have noticed this as well. When I told Ruby we were worried, she just laughed. Is there anything we can do?

A: It isn't always easy to get people to say that they have a drinking problem. Some older adults may be ashamed about their drinking. Others may feel their drinking doesn't hurt anyone. Turn to page 13 to learn how you can offer support and get help for yourself.

Q: Is it true that drinking a glass of red wine every day is good for my health?

A: This may be true for some people, but if you have a problem with alcohol, it's better for you to avoid drinking at all. You can get many of the same health benefits from a glass of grape juice. Ask your doctor or another health care worker for advice.

Q: I have been drinking for most of my adult life. Is it too late to quit?

A: No. Many older adults decide to quit drinking later in life. Treatment can work! Changing an old habit is not easy, but it can be done.

Did you know? Older women can have problems with alcohol. In fact, they are more sensitive than men to the effects of alcohol.



For Family, Friends, and Caregivers

Have you ever thought...

“It’s hard to know what to do. When I try to talk to my friend about his drinking, he gets very upset and changes the subject.”

“I’m worried that my mother takes a lot of medicines and still drinks. But, I have no idea if her doctor knows this. How can I get her to talk to her doctor about her drinking?”

“Sometimes I think I shouldn’t say anything about my uncle’s drinking. Then something happens, like last week he fell and bruised his arm and face. I’ll bet he was drunk. How am I supposed to ignore that?”



You can't force someone to get help, but here are steps you can take to help.

Step 1: Talk.

- Talk about your worries when the person is sober. Try to say what you think or feel, like "I am concerned about your drinking."
- Give facts. Some people find it helpful just to get information. You could say, "I want to share some things I've learned about older adults and alcohol."
- Try to stay away from labels like "alcoholic."
- Ask to go to doctor visits with your family member.

Step 2: Offer your help.

- Suggest things to do that don't include drinking.
- Encourage counseling or attending a group meeting. Offer to drive to and from these support meetings.
- Give your support during treatment.



Step 3: Take care of yourself.

- You need support, too. Think about what you need to stay safe and healthy.
- Involve other family members or friends so you are not in this alone. Talk honestly about how you are feeling. Try to say what support or help you need.
- Try going to counseling or special meetings that offer support to families and friends of people with drinking problems.

There may be programs such as Al-Anon at your local hospital or clinic. Al-Anon is listed in the white pages of your local phone book, or call 1-888-425-2666 to find a meeting near you.

Remember—you can't make a person deal with a drinking problem. You can offer support and get help for yourself.



We Did It—So Can You!

You can make changes in your drinking habits even if you are an older adult. Here are some stories about people who are like you. Each one has made changes in his or her drinking.

No drinking with medicines.

“My doctor said now that I’m taking all these medicines, I shouldn’t drink at all. Having a few beers each night could cause even bigger health problems. I decided that the drinking wasn’t worth it.”

Sober for 4 years and going strong.

“I drank heavily from the time I was 22 until I was 69. I never thought I would be able to quit. But I did. It wasn’t easy. I had a lot of help. I still take it a day at a time. It’s been 4 years and so far, so good.”

Found activities I enjoy.

“After I retired, I was bored. I suppose I drank to pass the time. My wife urged me to join her at the senior center. A group of us play cards a few times a week. Having fun replaced drinking, and I don’t even miss it.”

Cutting back or quitting can be hard. But, you have probably done other hard things in your life. You can do this, too.



For More Information

To learn more about health and aging:

National Institute on Aging Information Center
P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation

To learn more about drinking problems:

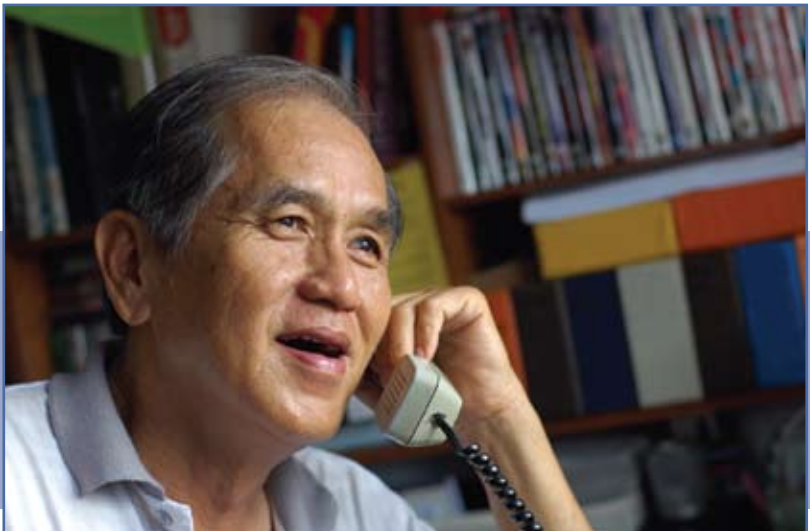
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

5635 Fishers Lane, MSC 9304

Bethesda, MD 20892-9304

301-443-3860

www.niaaa.nih.gov



To find out how to get help:

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Look up Alcoholics Anonymous in your local phone book.

AA's main office:

Grand Central Station

P.O. Box 459

New York, NY 10163

212-870-3400

www.aa.org

Al-Anon

Look up Al-Anon in your local phone book or call
1-888-425-2666 (toll-free) to find a meeting near you.

Al-Anon's main office:

1600 Corporate Landing Parkway

Virginia Beach, VA 23454

757-563-1600

www.al-anon.alateen.org

Eldercare Locator

Contact this service to ask about resources near you.

1-800-677-1116 (toll-free)

www.eldercare.gov

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

1-800-662-4357 (toll-free)

When you call this toll-free number, a recorded message gives you the following choices: speak with someone about substance abuse treatment, ask for printed material on alcohol or drugs, or get a referral to local substance abuse treatment.

Notes

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