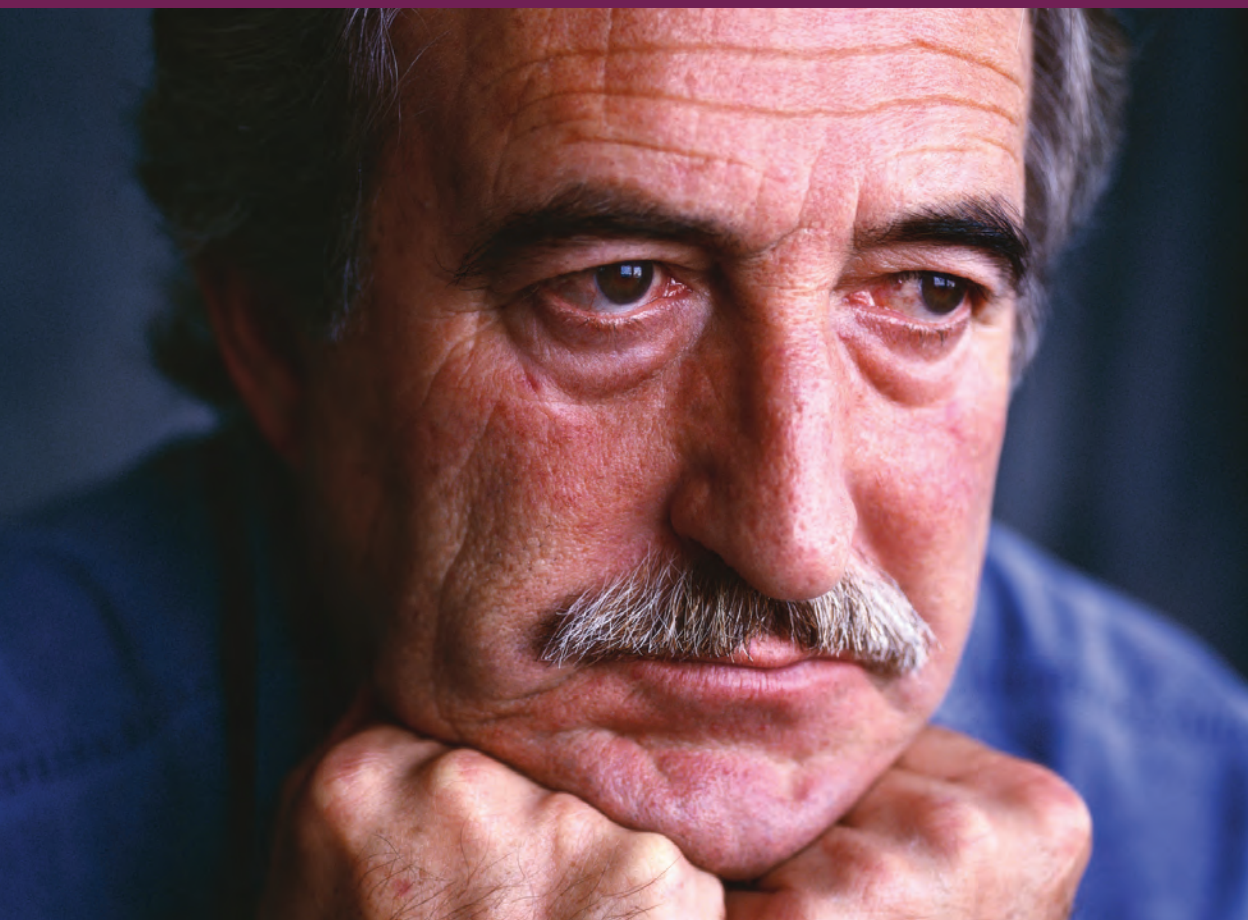
Older Adults and Alcohol

You can get help



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Tips about using this booklet

Use the Table of Contents to help you find things quickly. Also, page 17 of the booklet has a list of groups you can call for more information about alcohol.

What's inside

Read this booklet to learn about alcohol and aging. Use it to start talking about how drinking may be affecting your life. Share this booklet with your friends and family. Don't miss the special section on page 12 to learn how friends and family can help.

Family support can often make a big difference.

This booklet will help you learn about:

- some problems older people may have with alcohol
- what you can do if you think you have a drinking problem
- how your family and friends can help

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'm 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.

Did you know?

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

Heavy drinking can make some health problems worse

"I take medicine to keep my diabetes under control. Every night I have a couple of shots of whiskey. 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 healthcare 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 prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, 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."

Some problems mixing medicine and alcohol:

- 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 or 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.

Facts about alcohol and aging:

- You can become more sensitive to alcohol as you get older.
- Heavy drinking can make some health problems worse.
- Medicines and alcohol don't mix.

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. Don't 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:

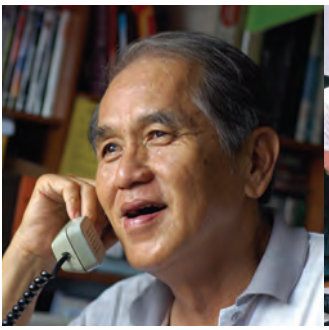
- Find a support group for older adults with alcohol problems.
- Talk to a healthcare professional like your doctor.
- Ask about medicines that might help.
- Visit a trained counselor who knows about alcohol problems and how they affect older adults.
- Choose individual, group, or family therapy, depending 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 to help you stop drinking:

- ☐ Remove alcohol from your home.
- ☐ Eat food when you are drinking—don't drink on an empty stomach. When you drink, sip slowly.
- ☐ Say "no thanks" or "I'll have something else instead" when offered a drink.
- ☐ Avoid drinking when you are angry or upset or if you've 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. 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.

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. 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 distilled spirits (gin, rum, tequila, vodka, whiskey, etc.). The label on the bottle will say 80 proof or less.

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

It is helpful to understand the "standard" drink sizes in order to follow health guidelines. However, it also is important to keep in mind that drinks may be stronger than you think they are if the actual serving sizes are larger than the standard sizes. In addition, drinks within the same beverage category, such as beer, can contain different percentages of alcohol.

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. 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 healthcare worker for advice.

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 12 to learn how you can offer support and get help for yourself.

For family, friends, and caregivers

Marisol, John, and Thelma are all in a support group for people who have friends or family with a drinking problem. During a group meeting, they share their concerns and listen to what their group leader, Ted, suggests for how to help someone with a drinking problem.

Marisol: 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 want to help him, but I don't want to lose him as a friend.

John: I'm worried that my mother takes a lot of medicines and still drinks. I have no idea if her doctor knows this. I wonder if I should say something to her doctor, but I don't want to betray my mother's trust. I wonder how I can get her to talk to the doctor about the drinking.

Thelma: 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? I just don't know if I should get involved or leave it up to his daughter. She does not seem to notice he has a problem.

Ted: You can't force someone to get help, but there 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 if you can go to the doctor with your family member or friend.

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 at your local hospital or clinic. For example, Al-Anon is a support group for friends and family of people with a drinking problem. Find a meeting near you by calling 1-888-425-2666.

Follow these tips for helping a family member or friend who has a drinking problem:

Step 1: Talk.

Step 2: Offer your help.

Step 3: Take care of yourself.

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.

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 plays cards a few times a week. Having fun replaced drinking, and I don't even miss it."

No drinking with medicines

"My doctor said now that I'm taking all these medicines, I shouldn't drink at all. Having a few cocktails each night could cause even bigger health problems. I decided that the drinking wasn't worth 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 drinking problems:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

5635 Fishers Lane, MSC 9304
Bethesda, MD 20892-9304
Phone: **1-301-443-3860**
Website: **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
Phone: **1-212-870-3400**
Website: **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
Phone: **1-757-563-1600**
Website: **www.al-anon.alateen.org**

Eldercare Locator

Contact this service to ask about resources near you.

Phone: **1-800-677-1116** (toll-free)
Website: **www.eldercare.gov**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

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

Phone: **1-800-662-4357** (toll-free)
Website: **www.samhsa.gov**

To learn more about health and aging:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057
Phone: **1-800-222-2225** (toll-free)
TTY: **1-800-222-4225** (toll-free)
Website: **www.nia.nih.gov/health**
Spanish website: **www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol**

Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (**www.nihseniorhealth.gov**), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health and wellness information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.

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