

Alcohol and Aging – Understanding the Risks

Alcoholic beverages, consumed in a responsible manner, can add to the enjoyment of a meal, contribute to a favorite recipe or help celebrate the quality of life that older Americans are entitled to experience. However, older adults face distinct risk factors that complicate alcohol consumption and can lead to alcohol abuse.

Why Alcohol Consumption Becomes More Complicated as One Ages

- Because of a changing metabolism and changes in levels of body fat and body water, a standard drink produces higher blood alcohol levels and causes greater intoxication in an older person than it would in a younger drinker.
- Alcohol is known to interact adversely with up to 50 percent of the most commonly prescribed medications. It's important to speak with a health care professional or pharmacist about possible alcohol and drug interactions.
- Older adults often use alcohol as a coping mechanism for life-changing events as retirement; the death of a family member, a friend or a pet; reduced income; health concerns; or family conflict. They also may turn to alcohol more often to deal with mental-health challenges such as depression, loss of self-esteem, loneliness or feeling useless.

What Adult Children or Concerned Friends and Family Should Know

Would you know if your loved one had a problem with alcohol or substance abuse? Often the outward signs are mistaken as being a part of aging, dementia or depression when, in fact, the person may be drinking too much or mixing alcohol with medications. The following signs and symptoms are commonly seen in older adults who have an alcohol or substance abuse problem:

Signs and Symptoms

- Yellowish or unhealthy-looking skin, yellow or bloodshot eyes
- Swelling or losing weight
- Excessive fatigue
- Frequent and unexplained headaches, pain or injuries
- Memory trouble after having a drink or taking a medication
- Confusion, irritability, mood swings
- Sadness, depression
- Loss of coordination (walking unsteadily, frequent falls)
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Wanting to be alone much of the time
- Neglecting personal hygiene; failing to bathe or keep clean
- Difficulty staying in touch with family or friends
- Lack of interest in usual activities

If someone you care about is having a problem with alcohol or another substance, please seek help. Getting your aging loved one help and treatment will vastly improve their physical and mental health and go a long way to enhancing their overall quality of life.