

# Integrated Regional Falls Program



North Simcoe Muskoka LHIN

## Alcohol and Aging

As people get older, their bodies change. They can develop health problems or chronic diseases. They may take more medications than they used to. All of these changes can make alcohol use a problem for older adults.

### Older Adults are Sensitive to Alcohol's Effects

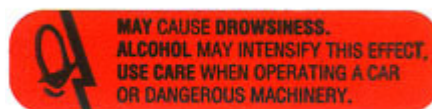
As people age, they may become more sensitive to alcohol's effects. One reason is that older people metabolize, or break down, alcohol more slowly than younger people. So, alcohol stays in their bodies longer. Also, the amount of water in the body goes down with age. As a result, older adults have a higher percentage of alcohol in their blood than younger people after drinking the same amount of alcohol.

Aging lowers the body's tolerance for alcohol. This means that older adults can experience the effects of alcohol, such as slurred speech and lack of coordination, more readily than when they were younger. An older person can develop problems with alcohol even though his or her drinking habits have not changed.

### Drinking Can Cause or Worsen Health Problems

Drinking too much alcohol can cause health problems. Heavy drinking over time can damage the liver, the heart, and the brain. It can increase the risk of developing certain cancers and immune system disorders as well as damage muscles and bone.

Drinking too much alcohol can make some health conditions worse. These conditions include diabetes, high blood pressure, congestive heart failure, liver problems, and memory problems. Other health issues include mood disorders such as depression and anxiety. Adults with major depression are more likely than adults without major depression to have alcohol problems.



### Alcohol and Medicines

Many older adults take medicines, including prescription drugs, over-the-counter (non-prescription) drugs, and herbal remedies. Drinking alcohol can cause certain medicines to not work properly and other medicines to become more dangerous or even deadly. Mixing alcohol and some medicines can cause sleepiness, confusion, or lack of coordination, which may lead to accidents and injuries. It also may cause nausea, vomiting, headaches, and other more serious health problems.

## Some Medicines and Alcohol Don't Mix

Dozens of medicines interact with alcohol and can be harmful. Here are some examples.

- Taking aspirin or arthritis medications and drinking alcohol can increase the risk of bleeding in the stomach.
- Taking the painkiller acetaminophen and drinking alcohol can increase the chances of liver damage.
- Cold and allergy medicines that contain antihistamines often makes people sleepy. Drinking alcohol can make this drowsiness worse and impair coordination.
- Drinking alcohol and taking some medicines that aid sleep, reduce pain, or relieve anxiety or depression can cause a range of problems, including sleepiness and poor coordination as well as difficulty breathing, rapid heartbeat and memory problems.
- Drinking alcohol and taking medications for high blood pressure, diabetes, ulcers, gout, and heart failure can make those conditions worse.

Medications stay in the body for at least several hours. So, there can still be a problem if you drink alcohol hours after taking a pill. Read the labels on all medications and follow the directions. Some medication labels warn people not to drink alcohol when taking the medicine. Ask a doctor, pharmacist, or other health care provider whether it's okay to drink alcohol while taking a certain medicine.

## How Alcohol Affects the Body

Drinking alcohol affects the body in many ways. These effects can lead to physical and mental changes that can put alcohol users and others at risk of injury or death. Possible dangers include **falls**, household accidents, and car crashes.

## How Alcohol Moves Through the Body

When a person drinks beer, wine, or another alcoholic drink, the alcohol is quickly absorbed in the blood and then carried throughout the body. A drink of alcohol stays in the body for about 2 hours after being consumed. This period of time can vary depending on the person's weight, gender, and other factors. When a person drinks, the concentration of alcohol in the blood builds to a peak, then goes down. At first, alcohol often makes people feel relaxed and happy. Later, it can make them feel sleepy or confused.

## How Alcohol Affects the Liver, Brain, and Heart

Drinking too much alcohol affects many parts of the body. It can be especially harmful to the liver, the organ that metabolizes (breaks down) alcohol and other harmful substances. Alcohol not broken down by the liver goes to the rest of the body, including the brain. Alcohol can affect parts of the brain that control movement, speech, judgment, and memory. These effects lead to the familiar signs of drunkenness: difficulty walking, slurred speech, memory lapses, and impulsive behavior. Long-term heavy drinking can shrink the frontal lobes of the brain, which impairs thinking skills.

Long-term alcohol use can also result in high blood pressure, which increases a person's risk of heart disease. However, blood pressure can go back to normal within a few months after drinking stops if there is not a lot of damage to the heart.

## **Male and Female Drinkers Compared**

Alcohol affects men and women differently. In general, older men are more likely to drink alcohol compared with older women. But women of all ages are often more sensitive than men to the effects of alcohol. Women's bodies tend to break alcohol down more slowly. Also, women have less water in their bodies than men, so alcohol becomes more concentrated. As a result, women may become more impaired than men after drinking the same amount. That is why the recommended drinking limit for women is lower than for men.

## **How Alcohol Affects Safety**

### **Even a Small Amount Can Be Dangerous**

Drinking even a small amount of alcohol can lead to dangerous or even deadly situations. Drinking can impair a person's judgment, coordination, and reaction time. This increases the risk of falls, household accidents, and car crashes. Alcohol is a factor in 60 percent of fatal burn injuries, drownings, and homicides and in 40 percent of fatal motor vehicle crashes, suicides, and fatal falls.

### **Bad for the Bones**

In older adults, too much alcohol can lead to balance problems and falls, which can result in hip or arm fractures and other injuries. Older people have thinner bones than younger people, so their bones break more easily. Studies show that the rate of hip fractures in older adults increases with alcohol use.

### **Drinking Too Much Can Be Harmful**

Millions of older adults drink alcoholic beverages. Some of them drink too much, which can harm their health and lead to safety problems. Sometimes it's hard to tell if someone has a drinking problem. Some signs of drinking, such as falls and depression, can be mistaken for other physical or mental conditions. Some people don't recognize or admit that they have a problem. Drinking problems are serious and should be treated by a doctor or other health care professional.

### **How Much Is Safe To Drink?**

In general, healthy men and women over age 65 should not drink more than seven drinks a week. Depending on their health and how alcohol affects them, older adults may need to drink less than this or not at all. Do not drink if you take medicines that interact with alcohol, or have a medical condition that can be made worse by drinking.

### **How to Tell if Someone Drinks Too Much**

For older adults, clues to a possible alcohol problem include memory loss, depression, anxiety, poor appetite, unexplained bruises, falls, sleeping problems, and inattention to cleanliness or appearance. Answering "yes" to at least one of the following questions is also a sign of a possible drinking problem.

- Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
- Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
- Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?

- Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, talk with your health care provider. Also seek help if you feel you are having drinking-related problems with your health, relationships, work, or the law. Older adults drink for different reasons than do younger adults. Some have been drinking for many years and are physically dependent on alcohol. Others start drinking later in life because of health problems, boredom after retirement, or loneliness after the death of a spouse or close friend. This is called "late-onset drinking." Feeling tense or depressed can also trigger drinking.

This information courtesy of the National Library of Medicine (2012).

Alcohol Use and Older Adults. Retrieved from

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/alcoholuse/alcoholandaging/01.html>