

## Alcohol Misuse and Abuse: A Fact Sheet to Share

Alcohol is a culturally acceptable drug that is commonly overused and misused by older adults, often times unintentionally. Many people are not aware of the age related changes that make the body more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. As we age, our bodies experience changes that impact the absorption, processing and excretion of alcohol. Amongst older adults age 60 and older, the average amount of alcohol consumed is increasing.<sup>i</sup> Since alcohol is widely considered culturally acceptable, alcohol misuse and abuse goes largely under-estimated, under-identified, under-reported, under-diagnosed and under-treated.

It can be difficult to distinguish between misuse, abuse and addiction but we do know that people who increasingly use alcohol to cope with problems are vulnerable to addiction. Addiction is a disease. It is not a sign of weakness or a condition that can be willed away. Addiction is an illness that can develop at any age. Addiction problems can resolve with treatment, and older adults have a high success rate for overcoming addiction and substance abuse problems.

**Each of these is 1 standard drink**



Sparkling wine	Wine	Light beer	Regular beer	Fortified wine	Spirits
100 mL	100 mL	425 mL	285 mL	60 mL	30 mL
13% alc/vol	13% alc/vol	2.7% alc/vol	4.9% alc/vol	20% alc/vol	40% alc/vol

Pre-mixed spirits have between 1.5 – 2.4 standard drinks each

It is advised that older adults limit themselves to one standard drink per day and not exceed seven standard drinks per week.<sup>ii</sup> Each of the drinks to the left are considered a standard drink.<sup>iii</sup> People with certain health conditions, such as dementia, should avoid alcohol. Many commonly prescribed medications should not be combined with alcohol. The danger is that the alcohol will change the

effect of the medication or that the medication will intensify the effects of alcohol.

### The Dangerous Effects of Alcohol

Alcohol can be very dangerous for older adults due to the prevalence of sometimes multiple medical conditions and taking several medications at once. The information on the next page describes the risk of drinking alcohol when combined with health problems or medications.

### **Alcohol Can Trigger or Worsen the Following Health Problems:**

- Heart Problems
- Risk of Stroke
- High Blood Pressure
- Diabetes
- Certain Cancers
- Falls
- Liver Problems
- Gastrointestinal Bleeding
- Depression or Anxiety
- Mental Health Problems
- Osteoporosis
- Memory Problems
- Mood Disorders
- Central Nervous Degeneration

More than 75% of people over the age of 65 take a prescription medication. The average number of medications, including over-the-counter medication, they may be using at any given time is five. All drugs, prescription or over-the-counter, have side effects and many of these medications can be dangerous when combined with alcohol. Some medications, including over-the-counter medications, interact negatively with alcohol and can be deadly. Any medication (including over-the-counter medications) that indicates that it should not be used with alcohol should never be used with alcohol! Make sure to read the label before taking any new medication.

### **Medications that Can Be Dangerous when Combined with Alcohol:**

- Aspirin
- Acetaminophen
- Cold and Allergy Medicines
- Cough Syrup
- Sleeping Pills
- Pain Medication
- Anti-anxiety
- Antidepressants

### **Know Your Risk!**

Low-Risk Use: Your ability to set limits and use good judgement is not hindered, you do not binge drink, drive vehicles or use contraindicated medications.

At-Risk Use: You drink more than recommended or in situations/circumstances that are unsafe.

Problem Use: You continue to drink alcohol even though your drinking causes medical, social, familial and/or mental problems. You may deny having a problem with alcohol.<sup>ii</sup>

More information can be found on the website [www.mdaging.org](http://www.mdaging.org)

If you would like more information or assistance, contact Kim Burton at:

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<sup>i</sup> “Older Americans Behavioral Health Issue Brief 3: Screening and Preventive Brief Interventions for Alcohol and Psychoactive Medication Misuse/Abuse” developed for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [by Johnson, Bassin & Shaw Inc., 5515 Security Lane, Rockville, MD 20852] under Contract No. HHSS2832007000031.

<sup>ii</sup> “Older Americans Behavioral Health Issue Brief 2: Alcohol Misuse and Abuse Prevention” developed for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [by Johnson, Bassin & Shaw Inc., 5515 Security Lane, Rockville, MD 20852] under Contract No. HHSS2832007000031.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://nswlhd.health.nsw.gov.au/health-promotion/files/2013/06/StandardDrinks.png>