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Alcohol Use and Abuse

Anyone at any age can have a drinking problem. Uncle George always liked his liquor, so his family may not see that his drinking is getting worse as he gets older. Grandma Betty was a teetotaler all her life until she started having a drink each night to help her get to sleep after her husband died. Now, no one realizes that she needs a couple of drinks to get through each day.

These are common stories. The fact is that families, friends, and healthcare workers often overlook their concerns about older people drinking. Sometimes trouble with alcohol in older people is mistaken for other conditions related to aging, for example, a problem with balance. But, how the body handles alcohol can change with age. You may have the same drinking habits, but your body has changed.

Alcohol may act differently in older people than in younger people. Some older people can feel “high” without increasing the amount of alcohol they drink. This “high” can make them more likely to have accidents, including falls and fractures and car crashes.

Drinking too much alcohol over a long time can:

- Lead to some kinds of cancer, liver damage, immune system disorders, and brain damage.
- Worsen some health conditions like osteoporosis, diabetes, high blood pressure, and ulcers.
- Make some medical problems hard for doctors to find and treat—for example, alcohol causes changes in the heart and blood vessels. These changes can dull pain that might be a warning sign of a heart attack.
- Cause some older people to be forgetful and confused—these symptoms could be mistaken for signs of Alzheimer's disease.

Alcohol And Medicines

Many medicines—prescription, over-the-counter, or herbal remedies—can be dangerous or even deadly when mixed with alcohol. Many older people take medications every day, making this a special worry. Before taking any medicine, ask your doctor or pharmacist if you can safely drink alcohol. Here are some examples of problems caused by mixing alcohol with some medicines:

- If you take aspirin and drink, your risk of stomach or intestinal bleeding is increased.
- When combined with alcohol, cold and allergy medicines (the label will say antihistamines) may make you feel very sleepy.
- Alcohol used with large doses of acetaminophen, a common painkiller, may cause liver damage.
- Some medicines, such as cough syrups and laxatives, have high alcohol content. If you drink at the same time, your alcohol level will go up.
- Alcohol used with some sleeping pills, pain pills, or anxiety/anti-depression medicine can be deadly.

How Much Alcohol Is Too Much?

Although everyone is different, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, part of the National Institutes of Health, recommends that people over age 65 should have no more than seven drinks a week and no more than three drinks on any one day. Do you have a health problem? Are you taking certain medicines? You may need to drink less or not drink at all. Talk with your doctor.

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) like gin, vodka, or whiskey. The label on the bottle will say 80 proof or less.

When Does Drinking Become A Problem?

Some people have been heavy drinkers for many years. But, just as with Uncle George, over time the same amount of alcohol packs a more powerful punch. Other people, like Grandma Betty, develop a drinking problem later in life. Sometimes this

is a result of major life changes like death of dear friends or a loved one, moving to a new home, or failing health. These kinds of changes can cause loneliness, boredom, anxiety, or depression. In fact, depression in older adults often goes along with drinking too much.

Not everyone who drinks daily has a drinking problem. And, not all problem drinkers have to drink every day. You might want to get help if you, or a loved one, hides or lies about drinking, has more than seven drinks a week or more than three drinks in one day, or gets hurt or harms others when drinking.

Getting Help

Are you one of those people who should stop drinking due to health problems or medicines you need to take? If you want to stop drinking, there is help. Start by talking to your doctor. He or she may be able to give you advice about treatment. Your local health department or social services agencies may also be helpful. Here are some things you can try:

- Ask your doctor about medicine that will work for you.
- Talk to a trained counselor who knows about alcohol problems in older people
- Find a support group for older people with alcohol problems.
- Check out a 12-step program, like AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), that offers support to people who want to stop drinking.
- Locate an individual, family, or group therapy that works best for you.

Many older adults decide to quit drinking in later life. You can do it too. There are many things you can do to cut back or stop drinking. You can:

- Count how many ounces of alcohol you are getting in each drink.
- Keep track of the number of drinks you have each day.
- Decide how many days a week you want to drink. Plan some days that are free of alcohol.
- Pace yourself when you drink. Don't have more than one alcoholic drink in an hour. In place of alcohol, drink water, juice, or soda.
- Make sure to eat when drinking. Alcohol will enter your system more slowly if you eat some food.
- Ask for support from your family and advice from your healthcare provider. Get the help you need to quit.

Take time to plan ahead. Here are some things you can do:

- Develop interests that don't involve alcohol.
- Avoid people, places, and times of day that may trigger your drinking.
- Plan what you will do if you have an urge to drink.
- Learn to say "no, thanks" when you're offered an alcoholic drink.
- Remember to stay healthy for the fun things in life—birth of a grandchild, a long hoped for trip, or a holiday party.

No one wants to get hurt or to hurt others as the result of too much alcohol. Yet, it can happen if you drink more than you should. Be aware of how your body changes as you age. Be alert to these changes, adjust how much alcohol you can safely drink, and continue to enjoy life to the fullest.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

Adult Children of Alcoholics

P.O. Box 3216

Torrance, CA 90510

1-562-595-7813

www.adultchildren.org

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Look up the AA number in your local phone book.

AA's main office:

A.A. World Services, Inc.

P.O. Box 459

New York, NY 10163

1-212-870-3400

www.aa.org

Al-Anon

For families of alcoholics, 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:

Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters

1600 Corporate Landing Parkway

Virginia Beach, VA 23454

1-757-563-1600

www.al-anon.org

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

5635 Fishers Lane MSC 9304

Bethesda, MD 20892-9304

1-301-443-3860

www.niaaa.nih.gov

National Library of Medicine**Medline Plus**

www.medlineplus.gov

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration

1 Choke Cherry Road

Rockville, MD 20850

1-877-726-4727 (toll-free)

1-800-487-4889 (TTY/toll-free)

www.samhsa.gov

For more information about health and aging, contact:

**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

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