

Alcohol Use in Older Adults: What Families Should Know

Alcohol use can have a greater impact on older adults than on younger individuals. As the body ages, it processes alcohol differently, leading to stronger effects even with smaller amounts. Alcohol can interact with medications, worsen medical conditions, and increase the risk of falls and confusion. Understanding safe use and recognizing warning signs can help families support healthy aging.

Why Alcohol Affects Older Adults Differently

- Slower metabolism leads to higher alcohol levels in the body
- Increased sensitivity to alcohol's effects
- Higher likelihood of medication interactions
- Changes in balance and coordination

Common Risks of Alcohol Use in Older Adults

- Increased risk of falls and injuries
- Worsening memory and confusion
- Sleep disturbances
- Interaction with medications (e.g., sedatives, pain medications)
- Worsening depression or anxiety
- Liver or other organ problems

Warning Signs Caregivers May Notice

- Increased frequency or quantity of drinking
- Drinking alone or in secret
- Memory problems or confusion
- Falls or unsteadiness
- Mood changes or irritability
- Neglect of responsibilities or hygiene
- Mixing alcohol with medications

Safe Drinking Guidelines (General)

- Some older adults may be advised to avoid alcohol completely
- If alcohol is used, lower amounts are recommended than in younger adults
- Always discuss alcohol use with a healthcare provider
- Avoid alcohol when taking certain medications

When to Seek Medical Advice

- Concerns about increasing alcohol use
- Falls, confusion, or memory changes
- Mixing alcohol with medications
- Signs of withdrawal (tremors, sweating, anxiety)
- Worsening depression or anxiety

Ways Families Can Help

- Approach the topic with care and concern
- Encourage open conversations without judgment
- Attend medical appointments when possible
- Help monitor medication and alcohol interactions
- Encourage healthy routines and social engagement

National Organizations & Resources

✓ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)

 niaaa.nih.gov



✓ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

 1-800-662-HELP |  samhsa.gov

✓ National Council on Aging

 ncoa.org

✓ Eldercare Locator

 1-800-677-1116 |  eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Alcohol affects older adults more strongly and can increase health risks.
- Even moderate use may be unsafe depending on medications and health conditions.
- Early recognition and open discussion can improve safety and well-being.