

Alcohol and Older Adults



Many older adults enjoy a glass of wine with dinner. Or maybe it's a beer while watching the game on TV. Having a drink now and then is fine. But don't overdo it. As an older adult, alcohol may affect you differently than it does younger adults.

Alcohol and aging

As you age, you become more sensitive to alcohol's effects. After age 65, your lean body mass and water content drop. And your metabolism slows down. Alcohol stays in your system longer. So the amount of alcohol in your blood is higher than it would have been when you were younger.

Older adults also are more likely to have balance, hearing, and eyesight problems. They have slower reaction times, too. This puts them at higher risk for falls, broken bones, and car crashes tied to drinking.

Some health problems in people older than age 65, and the medicines used to treat them, can get worse with alcohol's effects. These include diabetes, high blood pressure, and ulcers.

Heavy alcohol use can also lead to other health problems, such as cancer and liver disease.

It's also linked to depression and suicide.

Medicine interactions

Medicines taken by older adults are more likely to have serious interactions with alcohol and other medicines. These include many prescribed and over-the-counter medicines and herbal products. Medicines and alcohol can interact even if they're not taken at the same time. That's because the medicine may still be in your blood when you have a drink. Always be honest with your providers about how much you drink. This will help them when they are prescribing your medicines.

Is there a safe amount?

The World Health Organization advises that no amount of alcohol is safe. Drinking alcohol is linked to a greater risk for many health conditions. They include:

- Cancer
- Liver disease
- Alcohol dependence
- Mental health disorders

The National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism advises that people older than age 65 who are healthy and don't take any medicines have no more than 7 drinks a week. And to have no more than 1 to 2 drinks in a day. One drink equals:

- 12 ounces of beer, ale, or wine cooler
- 8 ounces of malt liquor
- 5 ounces of wine
- Or 1.5 ounces of distilled liquor

How to cut down

If you want to limit your drinking or your healthcare provider suggests it, try these steps:

1. Write down your reasons for cutting back. These might include wanting to improve your health. Or to sleep better. Other reasons may be to improve relationships. And to stay independent.
2. Track your drinking habits for at least 1 week. Write down when and how much you drink each day. Count the number of ounces in each drink. Compare it to the advised daily intake. Many times, the amount of alcohol used is more than you thought.
3. Set a drinking goal. You may decide to cut down to 1 drink a day. Or not to drink at all. Write your goal on a piece of paper and put it where you will see it each day.
4. Instead of alcohol, try nonalcoholic drinks (mocktails) or low-alcohol beer.
5. Remove alcohol from your home.
6. Talk with your provider if you're worried about how you're feeling or behaving. Other treatable factors, such as depression or anxiety, may be an issue.
7. If you want to quit, but you've been a heavy drinker for many years, talk with your provider before quitting. If you stop drinking cold turkey, you may have severe withdrawal symptoms.

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