

Older Adults and Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol abuse in older adults might be tough to see. Alcohol use can sometimes look like normal aging. For instance, alcohol and age can both affect your balance, making you more likely to fall.

Older adults might not be able to handle as much alcohol as they used to. It might not take as many drinks for an older adult to notice the effects.

Effects of Alcohol on the Older Adult

Too much alcohol can cause serious health issues, such as stomach and liver problems. It can also increase your risk of getting certain cancers. Drinking too much alcohol might also make your current health issues worse.

Drinking alcohol can affect your memory and thinking. It can make it hard to remember and do things like you used to. You might also have problems sleeping.

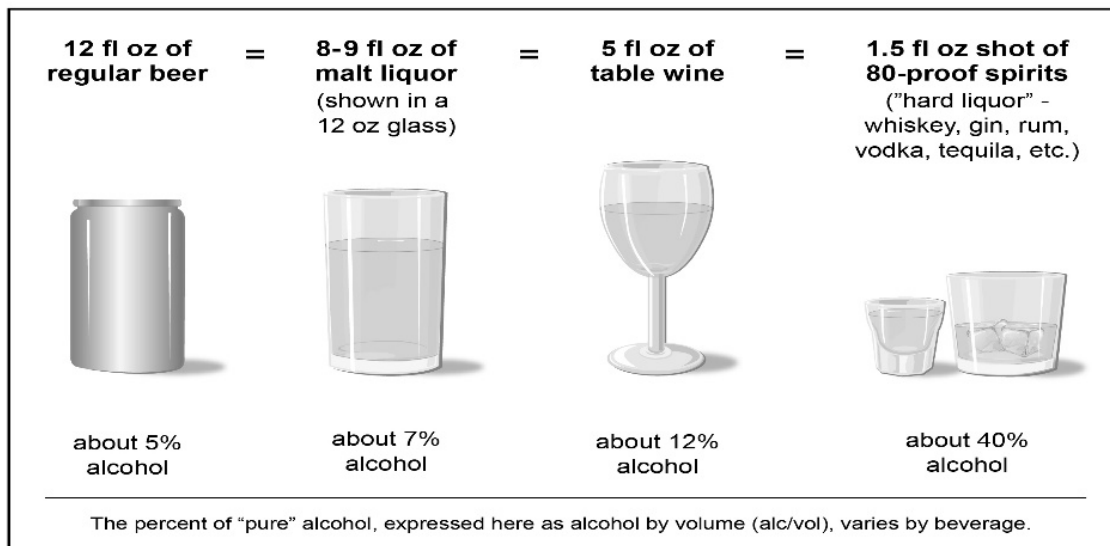
Alcohol use can affect your judgement, reaction time, balance, and coordination. This means you have a high risk of falling, having a household accident, or getting into a car crash.

Alcohol can also cause problems with your medicines, no matter how much you drink. It does not mix well with many medicines. This includes both prescription and over-the-counter medicines as well as some herbal supplements. Drinking alcohol while taking these medicines can be very harmful and may even lead to death.

The National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) says that adults 65 years and older should not have more than 1 standard drink a day. A standard drink is:

- 12 ounces of beer
- 4-5 ounces of wine
- 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits or liquor

Older adults who have health problems or take certain medicines should drink less than this or not at all.



Are you concerned about your drinking?

- ☐ Do you drink to calm your nerves or forget your worries?
- ☐ Do you lie about how much you drink?
- ☐ Does drinking cause you to hurt yourself or others?
- ☐ Do you drink alone?
- ☐ Do you plan your day based on where and when you can get a drink?
- ☐ When you drink do you find yourself feeling angry, bitter or annoyed?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you should seek help.

What can you do?

- **If you are feeling in urgent danger because of your drinking, call 911 or have someone take you to the hospital.**
- Talk to your doctor about your alcohol use. Please talk to your doctor if you take medicines or have medical problems that could be affected by your drinking.
- It can be hard to admit that you or your loved one has a drinking problem. Talk with someone you trust, such as a family member, friend, pastor or priest, or your doctor.
- Seek help. There are many free self-help programs, such as Alcohol Anonymous (<http://www.aa.org/>). There is also Al-Anon (<https://al-anon.org>) for family members of people with alcohol problems. Check out the websites for local groups near you.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 2/2023 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#5717