

THINK BEFORE YOU DRINK! THE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL IN OLDER ADULTS

The choice of whether or not to consume alcohol is a personal decision that we all make as we enter adulthood. That decision is influenced by many factors: family and social relationships, cultural practices and religious beliefs, to name a few. While most people who drink, do so in moderation, the aging process can create significant health risks for older adults who use alcohol, even in modest amounts. Here are a few facts to consider:

ALCOHOL HAS A HEIGHTENED EFFECT

As we age, our metabolism slows and we lose lean body mass. This increases the effect of alcohol on the system. That one drink we have always consumed before dinner will now have the same effect as two or three drinks.

ALCOHOL CAN IMPAIR SAFETY

Alcohol slows our reflexes, and even modest amounts can reduce alertness and concentration. Think of how many complex tasks we perform every day that require our full attention: driving, cooking, caring for young grandchildren and paying bills are just a few of these.

ALCOHOL CAN CAUSE AND EXACERBATE PHYSICAL ILLNESS

Alcohol raises blood pressure and increases blood sugar. It may contribute to problems with walking and balance and can cause falls. Alcohol can contribute to stomach ulcers and other digestive problems.

ALCOHOL CAN INTERFERE WITH MEDICATIONS

Older adults tend to suffer from more chronic illnesses. The average older person takes 3-4 prescription medications, plus a variety of over-the-counter preparations. Consuming alcohol may blunt the effectiveness of some medications and interact dangerously with others, leading to serious side effects, such as mental confusion, loss of consciousness and even death.

ALCOHOL CAN CONTRIBUTE TO SLEEP AND MOOD PROBLEMS

Older persons are more prone to insomnia. Rather than aiding sleep, alcohol can decrease our **quality** of sleep, causing us to awaken more frequently in the night.

Older adults are also at higher risk to develop depression due to chronic illness, loss of significant relationships, retirement and other lifestyle changes. The depressant effect of alcohol only compounds the problem.

ALCOHOL CAN HASTEN MEMORY LOSS

The most common form of dementia – Alzheimer’s Disease – is the result of the premature death of brain cells. Alcohol consumption, even in moderation, has been proven to speed up the rate at which brain cells die off. Once a brain cell has died, it is gone forever.

That’s certainly food for thought, isn’t it? So, we all must make the decision: Do I still want to drink? And if I do, what can I do to protect myself? The following suggestions may help you make a wise decision:

- * If you decide to drink, do so in moderation. That means no more than one drink per day, and avoid drinking before doing things such as driving, cooking or paying bills.
- * If drinking is an enjoyable part of your social interaction, switch to a less potent type of alcoholic beverage or choose a non-alcoholic form of beer or wine.
- * Listen to your family and friends, and stop drinking if they tell you that they notice problems with your mood, your alertness or your ability to function after consuming alcohol.
- * If consuming alcohol is not an enjoyable or important activity for you, then consider stopping. Your body, your brain – and your wallet – will thank you!

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