



ElderCare Q&A

Seniors & Safer Drinking

Q: Should older people be careful about their alcohol intake?

A: Yes. According to the Massachusetts Office of Healthy Aging, part of the Department of Public Health, not drinking any alcohol is the safest choice --- but if you know your body and your own limits when it comes to alcohol, you can drink 'more safely'.

Older people have a slower rate of metabolism --- the process which breaks down food into energy. Having a slower metabolic rate means it's harder for elders to process food and alcohol as fast as we used to. Alcohol therefore remains in our body longer, and at higher amounts. Older women, in particular, are less able to break down alcohol, so alcohol affects them faster than men.

Some seniors, after drinking, notice their vision is blurry, their balance is not as good, they feel less alert, and slower to react. This can lead to falls, car accidents, and other dangerous outcomes. Even in small amounts, alcohol can harm your health: making it harder to manage diabetes, harder to control high blood pressure and other chronic conditions. Alcohol use has been linked to breast, stomach and liver cancer.

Older people are often concerned about whether the medications they take will cause a bad interaction with alcohol. Such bad side effects can lead to illness, injury, and even death. Twenty-five percent of emergency room visits are linked to alcohol-medication interactions. There are more than 100 medications that cause a bad reaction mixed with alcohol. Even some common over-the-counter medications can cause bad side effects. If you are taking such medications as Tylenol, aspirin, Advil, Aleve, cold or cough medicine, laxatives, sleeping pills, vitamins or herbal and dietary supplements --- ask your pharmacist when you buy these medications how they interact with alcohol.

Some of the bad side effects from alcohol and medications can include: memory trouble after drinking; frequent falls or unsteady walk; trouble sleeping; unexplained bruises; sadness and depression; unexplained pain; changes in eating habits; trouble focusing or concentrating, and difficulty finishing sentences.

If you take any of the following medications, you should avoid alcohol: anticoagulants (like Coumadin or Warfarin); antidepressants; antihistamines for allergies; barbiturates and benzodiazepines to reduce stress and anxiety; high blood pressure meds; hypoglycemics to treat diabetes; sedatives and hypnotics. Always check the label on your medication bottle, and talk to your doctor if you are not sure whether or not to avoid alcohol given your list of drugs.

It is a myth that a "nightcap" will help you go to sleep. The reality is a drink as much as six hours before bedtime can make it harder for you to sleep soundly. A drink might make you fall asleep faster --- but it may keep you awake later in the night. Another myth is that alcohol enhances your sex life. Studies reveal that alcohol lowers sex drive and dulls sensations in both men and women.

If you are an older person who would like to reduce your drinking, consider these tips: 1) while you are drinking, also eat - so that it takes longer for the alcohol to reach your blood stream; 2) have a glass of water before you drink, to compensate for the fact that alcohol causes your body to lose water, making you thirstier; 3) for every drink you take, match it with a non-alcoholic drink, like juice or soda, to give your body a longer time to process the alcohol; 4) don't 'top off' your drink --- just drink one drink at a time. 5) dilute your drink with ice, juice or soda; 6) drink 'virgin' cocktails using non-alcoholic mixers; 7) drink slowly, putting your glass down in between sips. Drinking is not a race.

To learn more about safer use of medications with alcohol, call the Massachusetts Health Promotion Information Line at 1-800-962-6637, press "3" and leave a message that you want to order "Healthy Aging: Medications and Alcohol," or go to www.maclearinghouse.com.