

Alcohol and seniors

People are living longer and are generally healthier. This means that seniors are making up a larger portion of our population. Although alcohol use typically declines with age, some seniors may be at risk for alcohol-related problems.

What makes alcohol an issue for seniors?

Alcohol has a greater effect on seniors because our metabolism changes as we age. Older people are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol, and a little will go a long way. Seniors generally take more medications than other adults. Mixing alcohol with either prescription or over-the-counter drugs is unwise and can be dangerous. The development of age-related health problems can cause anxiety and drinking may help some people feel more relaxed. At the same time, chronic conditions such as heart disease or decreased mobility can be aggravated by alcohol use.

Loss of a spouse, friends, home, or career often occurs in later years. Alcohol may be used to deal with these and other emotional stresses. Retirement brings long stretches of leisure time and may result in feelings of loneliness and depression. Alcohol may assume a role in helping pass the time.

Alcohol problems among older persons are often mistaken for physical, social or emotional conditions associated with aging. The abuse or misuse of alcohol may go undetected or may be treated inappropriately.

For some seniors, lack of day-to-day contact with fellow workers, families, and neighbours can make it difficult for others to detect an alcohol problem if one exists.

Older people who have lived through many life experiences often pride themselves on being able to handle their problems without the help of outsiders. They may be unwilling to admit to a drinking problem or uncomfortable seeking help.

In general, alcohol problems among older people can be divided into three categories. Some seniors have used alcohol excessively throughout most of their lives. Others drink at low levels but are inadvertently mixing alcohol with other drugs in ways that are harmful. And some people begin to use alcohol for the first time in their later years.

Throughout our lives it makes sense to spend our time wisely and enjoy the best health possible. Seniors can choose healthier alternatives to alcohol use—exercise, a second career, hobbies, or professional counselling to help deal with grief and loneliness.

Getting to know your doctor and pharmacist is also a good idea. These health professionals will have answers about alcohol and other drug use.

Young or old, it is important to ask for help when needed. Information and treatment services are available in your area.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.