

# Caregiver Assistance News

“CARING FOR YOU...CARING FOR OTHERS”

## Drug and Alcohol Abuse

As we age, the need to take more and different kinds of medications increases. Growing older means our bodies respond differently to alcohol and medications than when we were younger.

Alcohol slows down brain activity. Because alcohol affects alertness, judgment, coordination, and reaction time, drinking increases the risk of falls and accidents. Some research has shown that it takes *less* alcohol to affect older people than younger ones. Over time, heavy drinking permanently damages the brain and central nervous system, as well as the liver, heart, kidneys, and stomach. Alcohol's effects can make some medical problems hard to diagnose. For example, alcohol causes changes in the heart and blood vessels that can dull pain that might be a warning sign of a heart attack. It also can cause forgetfulness and confusion, which can seem like Alzheimer's disease. Dementia patients are often anxious, depressed, confused, and frustrated. The disease makes it harder to control impulses, communicate emotions or to think rationally. So that puts dementia patients at risk to abuse alcohol. Learn the warning signs that a senior may be abusing alcohol, and what you can do about it.

### Alcoholism Disease Symptoms

- **Craving** – A need or urge to drink.
- **Loss of control** – Not being able to stop drinking once drinking has begun.



- **Physical dependence** – Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety after stopping drinking.
- **Tolerance** – The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to get “high.”

### To Become Alcohol-free

Help the person choose individual, group, or family therapy, depending on what works for him.

- Find a support group for older adults with alcohol problems.
- Talk to a health care professional; ask about medicines that might help.
- Visit a trained counselor who knows about alcohol problems and how they affect older adults.
- Encourage the person to join a 12-step program such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA offers support and programs for people who want to quit drinking.

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## Avoiding Problems with Prescription Medications

Prescription drug abuse is when a person uses prescription medication not prescribed for that person, or uses the medication in a way that hasn't been recommended by a doctor. People 65 years and older comprise only 13 percent of the population, yet account for more than one-third of total outpatient spending on prescription medications in the United States. Older patients are more likely to be prescribed long-term and multiple prescriptions, and some experience cognitive decline, which could lead to improper use of medications. Alternatively, those on a fixed income may abuse another person's remaining medication to save money.

When used responsibly, prescription medications improve lives. But these drugs also carry the risk of dependence and addiction—and seniors are particularly vulnerable. The changing metabolisms of older people can intensify the effects of drugs and alcohol. Aging is often characterized by loss and loneliness—two conditions that increase the risk of substance abuse.

Painkillers and sedative labels warn against alcohol use, but an elderly person may forget about the warning. **Even a small amount of alcohol, in combination with certain prescription medications, can suppress breathing—with fatal results.**

**It's also essential not to combine drugs—prescription or not—without consulting your health practitioner, or to deviate from the prescribed dosage.**

Caregivers can help by encouraging older adults to use pain killers and sedatives only when absolutely necessary, and to taper off as soon as they can. **It's equally important to help seniors tackle the underlying problems, and not just treat their symptoms.**



- » Remind them to *always* avoid alcohol when taking painkillers or sedatives.
- » Encourage them to bring all their medications to their doctor when they go for their yearly checkups, so the physician has a record of exactly what they're taking.
- » Check medication use—prescription and over-the-counter—and be sure they understand label warnings and the dangers of drug interaction.
- » Encourage them to throw out outdated prescription and over-the-counter medications.
- » Know what medications the person in your care is taking, and why.

Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse; Caring.com

## Alcoholic Liver Disease

The first symptoms of alcoholic liver disease appear only when severe, life-threatening liver disease is already present. The best treatment is to abstain from alcohol. Even people with advanced liver disease caused by drinking alcohol can significantly improve the disease if they stop drinking.

Source: *The Comfort of Home for Chronic Liver Disease*

## Taking Care of Yourself— Women and Alcohol

For women, moderate alcohol intake means no more than one drink. For men, it's two drinks a day.

Why is alcohol intake gender sensitive, and what effects does this have on women?

- ✓ Women tend to be smaller and proportionately have less body water where alcohol is diluted.
- ✓ Breaking down alcohol is slower in women since their stomach enzymes are less active. This makes the entry of alcohol into the bloodstream more likely.
- ✓ High levels of alcohol intake predisposes women to developing damage to the liver, heart, and brain, and increases breast cancer risk.
- ✓ Higher alcohol intake weakens the bones.
- ✓ Alcohol has a greater effect on women's driving skills, which can result in a fatal car crash.

Source: [www.berkeleywellness.com](http://www.berkeleywellness.com)



## Be Wary of Scams

Don't give or send cash to charities. For security and tax record purposes, contribute by check or credit card or another way that provides documentation of the gift.

## Live Life Laughing!

No thanks, doesn't agree with my medications.



## Inspiration

*God grant us the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

~ *Serenity Prayer*

## Don't Fall – Be Safe

Anti-anxiety medications like Valium, Xanax and Ativan; sleeping pills like Ambien, Restoril, and even Tylenol PM have been implicated in increasing fall risk.

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## SAFETY TIPS—Drinking Problem?

There is evidence that a *single* drink per day may give some health benefit to the elderly. One drink has been shown to protect against coronary heart disease, myocardial infarctions and Type 2 diabetes among other things. But the secret here is the word: single.

Answer the following four questions can help you find out if you or a loved one has a drinking problem:

- ★ Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
- ★ Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
- ★ Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
- ★ Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?

One “yes” answer suggests a possible alcohol problem. More than one “yes” answer means it is highly likely that a problem exists. If you think that you or someone you know might have an alcohol problem, it is important to see a doctor or other health care provider. They can help you determine if a drinking problem exists and plan the best course of action.

Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>

NEXT ISSUE... PRACTICAL AIDS FOR LIVING

# Caregiver Assistance News

“ C A R I N G F O R Y O U ... C A R I N G F O R O T H E R S ”

## Q U I C K Q U I Z

People taking certain over-the-counter or prescription medications and people with medical conditions that can be made worse by drinking, should *never* drink. Alcohol and drug misuse raises the risk of illness or death from numerous health problems, including liver disease, heart disease, and some types of cancer. Answer True or False to the questions below.

1. When we are older our bodies respond differently to alcohol and medications than when we were younger.  
T F
2. Over time, heavy drinking permanently damages the brain and central nervous system, as well as the liver, heart, kidneys, and stomach.  
T F
3. Tolerance of alcohol such as the need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to get “high” is a sign of alcoholism.  
T F
4. There is evidence that a *single* drink per day may give some health benefit to the elderly.  
T F
5. The best treatment for alcoholic liver disease is to abstain from alcohol.  
T F
6. Always avoid alcohol when taking painkillers or sedatives.  
T F
7. Prescription medications prescribed by your doctor do not carry any risk of dependence or addiction.  
T F
8. It is important to understand drug label warnings and the dangers of drug interaction.  
T F
9. Medical problems can be hard to diagnose when a person has been drinking alcohol.  
T F
10. It takes *more* alcohol to affect older people.  
T F

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_