

ALCOHOL USE IS AN IMPORTANT HEALTH CONCERN FOR OLDER ADULTS



Caregivers, family, friends and even physicians often dismiss the impact of alcohol on older adults, since the elderly are generally perceived as more moderate drinkers. However, the impact of medications and alcohol when taken together can create serious problems for older people, and consequently even casual drinking can become a health issue.

“The reason caregivers should be concerned is that older people often continue to drink the same amount of alcohol but their bodies metabolize it at a lower rate, so the relative concentration of alcohol in their blood begins to build”, explains Dan G. Blazer, MD, Ph. D. at the Duke Medical Center in Durham, NC.

Alcohol is a toxin that can cause liver disease, such as cirrhosis. Because medications also are metabolized by the liver, if the alcohol causes damage, the drugs may not be able to be cleared as quickly from the body and can reach toxic levels. On the other hand, alcohol stimulates liver enzymes, so a prescription drug might actually be metabolized more quickly. In this event, the drug might not provide adequate therapeutic value.

Characteristics of older drinkers can make the situation even worse. Older people tend to be “silent” drinkers, and they may become obstinate or deny a problem when confronted. Though intervention by family members is often required, the issue is a tough one for caregivers. Everyone in the family must agree on the need for intervention, and the parent’s physician is often needed as an ally to tackle the problem.

Scientist Frank M. Ahern, Ph. D. and senior assistant Carol H. Gold, MS, both at Penn State University’s program in biobehavioral health, found that 42% of all prescriptions dispensed to older people are alcohol interactive, and 47% of the 30 most frequently prescribed drugs interact with alcohol.

The most important fact for caregivers to learn is that there is interaction between alcohol and many drugs. The severity can vary, depending on the particular drug, the amount of alcohol consumed and the general condition of the older person, but this is a very common problem.

Alcohol and drug interactions can be difficult to determine, even for doctors, because so many of the symptoms mimic normal signs of aging. If the person

seems to develop memory problems, begins having dizzy spells, or falls, alcohol or drug interaction should be considered. The physician should certainly be aware of alcohol consumption. If the drinking is moderate, the doctor may suggest periodic testing to monitor the levels of medication in the blood.

For additional information about caregiver issues, contact Quest EAP for a referral to our Eldercare Specialist. This service is confidential and cost-free with no obligation.



Call us at 1-800-364-6352