

# Alcohol Use and Abuse

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As you grow older, your body is less able to handle alcohol. For this reason, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism recommends that people over age 65 who choose to drink have no more than one drink a day.

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## How Does Alcohol Affect Me As I Grow Older?



The aging process affects how the body handles alcohol. For this reason, the amount you drank when you were younger can have a much greater effect on you when you are older.

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### Impact on Judgment

More than a little alcohol at one time can have a great effect on your judgment, coordination, and reaction time. As a result, you can:

- Increase your risk of falls and hip fractures
  - Add to the risk of crashing your car (and almost 10% of this nation's drivers are over age 65)
  - Risk serious conflicts with family, friends, and even strangers
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### Impact on Health

As you age, your body becomes more sensitive to the effects of alcohol. It takes less alcohol to do damage to your body.

- Over time, heavy drinking can cause certain cancers, liver cirrhosis, immune system disorders, and brain damage.
- Medical problems such as high blood pressure, ulcers, and diabetes can become worse with alcohol use.
- Many prescription and over-the-counter medicines can be dangerous or even deadly when mixed with alcohol. If you are taking any medications, ask your doctor or pharmacist if you can safely drink alcohol.

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## How Does It Get Started?



A standard drink is one 12-ounce bottle or can of beer or a wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits. Drinking at this level usually is not associated with health risks.

Some people who have been drinkers for years now find that just a small amount of alcohol affects them.

Others may develop a problem with alcohol due to major life changes, failing health, or the death of friends or loved ones. These may cause loneliness, anxiety, and depression.

Depression in older adults often goes along with alcohol abuse. At first, a drink seems to bring relief from stressful situations. Later on, drinking can start to cause trouble.

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### Other Dangers

Alcohol can mask other health problems and make it difficult for your doctor to treat you. For example:

- Alcohol causes changes in the heart and blood vessels. These changes can dull pain that might be a warning sign of a heart attack.
- It can make older people forgetful and confused. These symptoms could be mistaken for signs of Alzheimer's Disease.

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## How Can I Get Help?

To get help, talk to your doctor. He or she can give you advice about your health, drinking, and treatment options.

Contact the local health department or social service agencies. Many have support groups and services to help.

Scientists continue to study the effects of alcohol and to look for new ways to treat alcoholism. This research will increase the chance for recovery and improve the lives of problem drinkers.

## How Do I Know If I Have a Drinking Problem?

### Instructions

Not everyone who drinks regularly has a drinking problem, and not all problem drinkers drink every day. But there are warning signs. Answer these questions honestly. If you answer “yes” to one of the questions, think about getting help for your drinking.

Alcohol Usage Questionnaire			
Question		Circle your answer	
1.	Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?	Yes	No
2.	Have you been annoyed by others' criticism of your drinking?	Yes	No
3.	Have you ever felt guilty about drinking?	Yes	No
4.	Have you ever had an “eye opener” to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover?	Yes	No
		<b>Total</b> _____	

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**Resources**

**Organizations**

***Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)***

Grand Central Station  
P.O. Box 459  
New York, NY 10163  
Phone: (212) 870-3400  
Web site: [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)

***National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence,  
Inc. (NCADD)***

22 Cortlandt St. Suite 801  
New York, NY 10007-3128  
Hope Line phone: (800) NCA-CALL (622-2255)  
Web site: [www.ncadd.org](http://www.ncadd.org)

***National Institute on Aging Information Center***

P.O. Box 8057  
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057  
Phone: (800) 222-2225  
TTY: (800) 222-4225  
Web site: [www.niapublications.org/agepages/alcohol.asp](http://www.niapublications.org/agepages/alcohol.asp)

***National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism  
(NIAAA)***

5635 Fishers Lane, MSC 9304  
Bethesda, MD 20892-9304  
Phone: (301) 443-3860  
Web site: [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)

***Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services  
Administration (SAMHSA)***

Phone: (800) 662-HELP (4357)  
Web site: [www.health.org](http://www.health.org)

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**Web Site**

<http://www.medlineplus.gov>

*Up-to-date, quality health care information. Go to: Health  
Topics, "Alcoholism."*