Getting Older & Wiser: SAFER DRINKING as you age

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Office of Healthy Aging

Do you drink alcohol – even just one drink now and then?

- ☐ Are you over 50?
- ☐ Do you ever take prescription medications?
- ☐ Do you ever take over-the-counter medications, such as aspirin or pain relievers?
- ☐ Do you want to sleep better?

If you said yes to any of these, then this guide is for you!

This guide will give you the facts to help you know your body and your limits when it comes to alcohol. If done the right way, many people can drink more safely. This guide will help you think through what is best for you.

If you have a history of alcohol or other substance abuse, or think you might have a problem, not drinking any alcohol is the safest choice. Talk to your health care provider about what is best for you.

Does age affect my ability to drink alcohol?

Every time you swallow a bite of sandwich or take a sip of coffee, your body works hard to process what you've eaten. Your body gets the energy it needs from food through a process called metabolism.

As we grow older, our body's metabolism slows down. This makes it harder for us to process everything we take in as fast as we used to. Because of this, alcohol stays in our bodies longer and at higher amounts.

Older women need to be especially careful. Women's bodies are less able to break down alcohol. Women are affected by alcohol faster than men.

Being aware of the changes in your body can help you decide what is right for you.

Metabolism is a group of reactions that take place in the body. It changes the food we eat into the energy necessary for everything we do.

How can alcohol affect me as I get older?

Alcohol can affect your mind and body as you get older. Have you experienced any of these after drinking alcohol?

- Loss of balance
- Being less alert
- Slower reaction times
- Blurry vision

These symptoms can lead to falls, injuries, car crashes, and other kinds of accidents.

If you are feeling any of these symptoms when you drink alcohol, talk to your health care provider.

It's just a drink, what can it really do to me?

Alcohol, even in small amounts, can be harmful to your health. Alcohol use has been linked to many diseases and cancers such as breast, stomach, and liver cancer.

Alcohol can make it harder to control chronic conditions such as diabetes or high blood pressure and may interfere with your medications.

One drink is:

- One can (12 oz.) of beer
- A single shot (1.5 oz.) of hard liquor
- A glass (5 oz.) of wine
- A small glass (4 oz.) of sherry, liqueur, or aperitif

Can I drink if I'm on medications?

Alcohol and medications can "interact" (mix with each other and cause bad side effects). These reactions can lead to illness, injury, and even death.

One out of four emergency room visits is linked to alcohol-medication interactions.* There are more than 100 medications that react with alcohol and cause bad side effects.

Which of the following common over-the-counter medications do you take?

- ☐ **Acetaminophen** (pain relievers such as Tylenol®)
- ☐ **Antacids**
- ☐ **Aspirin and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs** (NSAIDS: such as ibuprofen, Advil®, or Aleve®)
- ☐ **Cold, allergy, and cough medicine**
- ☐ **Herbal and dietary supplements**
- ☐ **Laxatives**
- ☐ **Sleeping pills or sleep aids**
- ☐ **Vitamins and minerals**

Even some "over-the-counter" medications can cause unwanted side effects when mixed with alcohol. These can include many things you can buy without a prescription.

*Alcohol Alert, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, No. 27 PH 355 January 1995

If you are taking any over-the-counter medications, find out how they interact with alcohol by talking to your pharmacist or health care provider.

Ever wonder if you had an alcohol-medication interaction?

Check below any symptoms you have had:

- ☐ **Memory trouble after having a drink or taking medicine**
- ☐ **Loss of coordination** (unsteady on your feet, frequent falls)
- ☐ **Changes in sleeping habits**
- ☐ **Unexplained bruises**
- ☐ **Mood swings** (sadness, depression)
- ☐ **Unexplained pain**
- ☐ **Changes in eating habits**
- ☐ **Trouble finishing sentences**
- ☐ **Trouble concentrating**
- ☐ **Other troubling reactions**

If you checked any of these, you may have had an alcohol-medication interaction. Tell your health care provider about what's happening to you.

Can I drink if I'm on medications?

Do you take any of the following?

- ☐ **Anticoagulants**
  (like Coumadin® or Warfarin®, used to prevent blood clotting)
- ☐ **Antidepressants**
  (used to treat depression)
- ☐ **Antihistamines**
  (used to treat allergies and other illnesses)
- ☐ **Barbiturates and benzodiazepines**
  (used to reduce anxiety and stress)
- ☐ **Cardiovascular medications**
  (used to treat heart problems and high blood pressure)
- ☐ **Some hypoglycemics**
  (used to treat diabetes and prediabetes)
- ☐ **Sedatives and hypnotics**
  (used to treat sleeping problems)

If you checked any of these boxes, avoid alcohol and talk to your health care provider about what is best for you.

Other medications not on this list may also interact with alcohol. Always check the label on medication bottles for directions and talk to your health care provider.

Nightcap? Not if you want to sleep!

Many people think of alcohol as a way to relax after a long day. Others think it can help them fall asleep at night. But a drink before bed (or even up to six hours before bed) can actually make you sleep less soundly.

While alcohol may help you fall asleep faster, it may keep you awake during the second half of the night. Poor sleep can affect your memory and mood, and can make it harder for your body to fight off sickness.

Alcohol can also make many sleep problems worse. Snoring, sleep apnea, and restless leg syndrome are all made worse with even small amounts of alcohol.

Can alcohol ever be good for me?
Have you heard that drinking might be good for you? This is a complex issue; talk to your doctor about what is best for you.

This doesn't mean you should start drinking if you don't already! Alcohol can be dangerous for many people.

Speaking of bedtime...

(Sleeping is not the only bedroom activity alcohol can affect.)

- Even small amounts of alcohol can make it difficult for men to keep an erection
- Alcohol lowers sex drive in both men and women
- Alcohol dulls sensation in both men and women, which can make it difficult to reach orgasm

Because everyone's body reacts to alcohol differently, it is important to talk to your health care provider about the pros and cons of drinking. This will help you decide what is best for you.

Helpful tips to reduce drinking:

- Eat before and while you're drinking so that it takes longer for alcohol to get into your bloodstream.
- Drink a glass of water before having alcohol. Alcohol causes your body to lose water, which can make you even thirstier.
- Have a non-alcoholic drink, such as soda, juice, or water, for every alcoholic drink you have. This will give your body more time to process the alcohol.
- Have one drink at a time – do not let people "top off" your drinks.
- Dilute drinks with water, ice, club soda, or juice.
- Drink "virgin" cocktails, using non-alcoholic mixers without the liquor.
- Drink slowly – take sips. Try putting your glass down between sips or doing something active, like dancing.

Knowing your body and your limits will help you stay healthy and keep up with the things you enjoy most!

More Information

For questions, concerns, or treatment information about alcohol and other drug abuse, call the Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline at **1-800-327-5050** or visit **www.helpline-online.com**. Services are available without health insurance.

People over age 65 can learn about safer use of medications and alcohol by ordering "Healthy Aging: Medications and Alcohol" from the Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse. Call **1-800-952-6637** or go to **www.maclearinghouse.com**.

PRODUCED BY:

The Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse, The Medical Foundation

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2007 – SA1051

FUNDED BY:

MA Department of Public Health
BSAS
Bureau of Substance Abuse Services
Prevent • Treat • Recover • For Life

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Office of Healthy Aging

DESIGN: Milk Row Studio