



# HEALTHY AGING

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## MEDICATIONS AND ALCOHOL

Sponsored by  
Massachusetts Department of Public Health  
Center for Community Health  
Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention  
Bureau of Substance Abuse Services



**F**amily, work, hobbies, travel...all this can lead to a pleasant and productive life!

Don't let problems with medications or alcohol slow you down. Take a few simple steps to promote health in your life!

### Step 1: Know your medications

Medications can help you feel better and be healthy. But it's important that you use your medications safely and correctly. Taking medications correctly will help you to:

- Avoid side effects caused from medication "interactions" (when medications react with each other)
- Prevent dangerous interactions between medications and alcohol. Interactions can make some medications too strong, and others not powerful enough.

**Did you know** that combining Western medications with Chinese medicine, herbs, healthy supplements, and dietary supplements can cause serious side effects?

**Did you know** that prescription medications can interact with "over-the-counter" medications and supplements? Over-the-counter means any medicine you can buy without a prescription. For example, these include:

- |                              |                                  |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ■ Aspirin and pain relievers | ■ Vitamins and minerals          |
| ■ Cold or allergy medicine   | ■ Herbal and dietary supplements |
| ■ Antacids                   | ■ Home remedies                  |
| ■ Laxatives                  |                                  |

Tips for taking your medications more safely:

- Inform your medical personnel (family doctor, nurse, pharmacist, herbalist, etc.) about all of the prescribed medications, over-the-counter medications, herbs, dietary supplements, and home remedies you may be taking.
- Make a list of what they are for, how much to take, and when to take them. Your pharmacist, nurse, family doctor, or herbalist can help you make this list.
- Use a medication chart. Order a free copy of "Prescription Medicines and You: A Consumer Guide" (1-800-358-9295, English only), which includes a fill-in chart. Your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist may also have medication charts.
- Bring your list, chart, or medications to all your medical visits.

### And remember!

- Take medications as prescribed. If you have any questions about your prescriptions, contact your family doctor.
- Don't share prescription medications with others.
- Ask medical personnel to go over all your medications at each visit. Be sure you understand when and how much of your medications and supplements you need to take.
- If you have questions about anything you are taking, it is important to ask the person who gave it to you.



## Step 2: Find out the facts about alcohol and its effects

Did you know that:

- One form of traditional Chinese medicine, drug/wine, is alcohol and it can have the same effects as other regular alcohol.
- Older adults are more sensitive to alcohol and drug/wine than younger adults.
- Alcohol and drug/wine can interact with some prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, herbs, and supplements.
- Alcohol and drug/wine can be especially risky for people with high blood pressure, diabetes, liver disease, and dementia.
- Alcohol and drug/wine can contribute to falls, trouble sleeping, and heart and other health problems.

**You can help prevent problems with alcohol.** Even if you have only a small amount on a special occasion, it's important to know how alcohol may affect you. Talk with medical personnel to find out:

- If alcohol is safe for you
- How much is safe for you to drink
- If alcohol will interact with your medications (your pharmacist can also help)

### Maximum recommended drinking limits for adults age 65 and older are:

- Men—One drink per day
- Women—Less than one drink per day

Drinking more than the recommended limit of alcohol can be unhealthy.



**Remember,** one drink is:

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

Source: Consensus Panel, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, US Department of Health and Human Services

Tips for preventing interactions with medications:

- If you take sleeping pills, pain pills, or pills for anxiety (nerves), alcohol can be especially dangerous. Talk with your medical personnel before you drink alcohol.
- Let your family doctor, and herbalist know if you drink, even if it's just once in a while, so you can be as safe as possible.
- Look for warning labels on medications. Read the information that comes with each medication or talk with your pharmacist.
- Choose a non-alcoholic beverage instead of alcohol.

### Can alcohol be good for my health?

While some reports say a little alcohol might benefit some people, it can be very unhealthy for others. Here are some important tips:

- Talk with your family doctor about alcohol.
- Don't drink more than the recommended limit of alcohol (see box above).
- If you don't drink alcohol now, don't start.



### Step 3: Watch out for signs of health problems

The tips in this brochure can help you prevent medication mistakes and problems with alcohol. Sometimes, retirement or poor health can lead to a problem that requires help.

You can watch for signs of a medication or alcohol problem, such as:

- Poor memory
- Accidents or getting hurt
- Sleeping problems
- Feeling depressed

If you think you might have a problem, talk with someone who can help. You can talk with a family member, doctor, nurse, or staff at a senior center. You can also get help any time by calling the Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline at 1-800-327-5050 (translation services in 140 languages available).

**If you think someone you know** is having a problem with medications or alcohol:

- Let the person know you are concerned. Explain why, such as, “The last time I saw you, you seemed to have trouble keeping your balance.”
- Encourage him or her to talk with someone who can help.
- Let the person know that treatment for medication or alcohol problems can help.



### Step 4: Get the help and support you need

Getting support—and giving support to others—can be good ways to help prevent problems and stay healthy. Here are some suggestions:

- Use the resources listed on the back of this brochure. Help can be just a phone call away.
- Get involved in free or low-cost activities at a recreational or senior center, social club, place of worship, or other organization.
- Help others, volunteer.
- Pursue hobbies: work in a garden, cook, read, dance, walk, exercise, tai chi, or listen to books on tape.
- Make new friends. Saying “hello” is often enough to start a friendship.



## Resources and Services

### Medication Information and Assistance

- **Massachusetts Prescription Advantage Program**  
1-800-AGE INFO (1-800-243-4636) (toll-free, English only)  
Information on the state's prescription medication program for elders and other elder services and programs, including local senior centers.
- **MassMedLine**  
1-800-AGE INFO (1-800-243-4636) (toll-free, English only)  
Information about free or low-cost prescription programs, and answers to health and medication questions. Interpreter services available.
- **"Prescription Medicines and You: A Consumer Guide"**  
1-866-633-1617 (toll-free, English only)  
Includes a medication chart that can help you keep track of your medications, herbs, and supplements.  
(US Department of Health and Human Services/AHRQ publication)

### Substance Abuse Information and Treatment

- **Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline**  
(24 hours, 7 days a week) • 1-800-327-5050  
(toll-free, translation services available in 140 languages)  
TTY: 617-536-5872 • [www.helpline-online.com](http://www.helpline-online.com)  
Information and referrals on alcohol and drug abuse services, programs, and related concerns.

### Health

- **Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse**  
1-800-952-6637 (toll-free) • TTY: 617-536-5872 (English only)  
[www.maclclearinghouse.com](http://www.maclclearinghouse.com) • Free health brochures.
- **Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Office of Healthy Aging**  
617-624-5070 (English only)  
Provides information on opportunities for older people to learn about and take responsibility for their own health.  
[www.mass.gov/dph/fch/elderhealth](http://www.mass.gov/dph/fch/elderhealth)
- **Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center**  
1-800-410-5288 • [www.gbcbgac.org](http://www.gbcbgac.org)  
Provides a wide-range of health and social services for Chinese-speaking Asian elders and their families in Eastern Massachusetts including Boston, Quincy, Brighton, Brookline, Cambridge, and Malden.