

# Alcohol addiction in older citizens is called "invisible epidemic"

Remember when your husband came home from work and made a "highball" or mixed a martini? People used to go out for drinks a lot. But physicians, social workers and younger family members are increasingly concerned that the occasional drink has become, for too many seniors, a new wave of people for whom alcohol is becoming a health problem: just too much of a good thing.

Senior citizen drinking problems have been labeled "the invisible epidemic" in some medical circles. More than one in six Americans over 60 years of age are overly dependent on alcohol, according to a University of Illinois report. Another report from the Federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration says the problem is "under-estimated, under-identified, under-diagnosed and under-treated." By one estimate, overuse of alcohol rivals heart attacks as a

cause of premature death among seniors.

Overuse of alcohol can create serious health problems as people age. As people's body mass decreases, the concentration of alcohol in the blood for each drink consumed goes up, so does its effect. Of the top 100 drugs prescribed for seniors, literally half of them have adverse reactions with alcohol. Combining prescription drugs with alcohol can be extremely dangerous because alcohol can quadruple the effect of a prescription drug. Alcohol interactions with prescription drugs can have negative effects like drowsiness, disorientation, hemorrhage, malnutrition and liver damage.

What is of greater concern to many physicians is the effect of too much alcohol on the brain. In one study, seniors who had reported over-use of alcohol were given an IQ test. They performed significantly worse

than a same-age control group. Physicians who studied the brains of people who used alcohol to excess found that their subjects' brains showed an advanced aging process; brain scans were similar to people many years older. Older abusers suffer more age-related symptoms and impairment than their peers or younger people.

Overuse of alcohol is an easy habit to acquire, according to the University of Illinois study. Of course, a person who has had a lifetime problem of alcohol abuse will likely continue if nothing happens to change their drinking. But most older people who fall into the problem don't start over-indulging until a serious physical or lifestyle change hits them: a serious health problem, the death of a spouse, a change in their financial situation, depression or sleeplessness might trigger overdrinking.

Shame is a huge factor for many. They know they are drinking too much, but don't want to be labeled "alcoholics" or feel the embarrassment that they are afraid will befall them if they seek help. It's hardest for women who have the problem, but more women than men fall into late-onset alcohol abuse.

Often enough, friends will spot the problem, but don't want to "interfere." Sometimes families fail to help because of their own denial, or taking the attitude reflected by "Why bother now? A little alcohol won't hurt and it may make the days easier for mom or dad." But according to Carol Colleran, director of Older Adult Services at Hanley-Halelden clinic in West Palm Beach, Florida, "The truth is alcohol and other drug abuse among older people leads to great physical and emotional deterioration and deprives them of the chance to enjoy their later years."

According to Colleran, when treatment is provided to older adults, they tend to do very well, better than their younger counterparts. Older adults tend to comply with requests to go to treatment and they finish treatment at a greater rate than younger adults. And because people are living longer these days, it makes no sense to assume that people are too old to change. It's never too late to get help.

The Illinois study is hopeful. "Overuse of alcohol can complicate virtually every aspect of an older person's life. But seniors have a higher rate of recovery from substance abuse than younger people. It's never too late to turn a life around."

Washington County Disability, Aging and Veteran Services (DAVS) works to create options for older persons, people with disabilities and veterans to improve the quality of their lives and to enable persons to live as independently as they can for as long as possible. This involves assessing needs; planning and coordinating services; developing services; advocating for their needs; and delivering and monitoring cost effective social and health services. DAVS may be reached at 503-640-3489 or by e-mail through its website: <www.co.washington.or.us/aging>.



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