THINK BEFORE YOU DRINK!

The Effects Of Alcohol In Older Adults

The choice of whether, or how, to use alcohol is a personal decision that we all make as we enter adulthood. That decision is influenced by many factors: cultural values, religious beliefs, family and social relationships. While most people who drink, do so in moderation, the aging process can create significant health risks for older adults who use alcohol, even in modest amounts. Here are some things to consider:

Alcohol Has A Heightened Effect:

As we age, our metabolism slows and we lose lean body mass. This increases the effect of alcohol on the system. That one drink we have always had before dinner will now have the same impact on us as two or three drinks.

Alcohol Can Impair Safety:

Alcohol slows down our reflexes and even modest amounts can reduce our alertness and concentration. Think of how many tasks we perform that require our full attention: driving, cooking and paying bills are just a few of these.

Alcohol Can Cause And Exacerbate Physical Illness:

Alcohol increases blood sugar and raises blood pressure. It may contribute to problems with walking and balance and may cause falls. Alcohol can cause stomach ulcers and other digestive problems.

Alcohol Can Interfere With Medications:

As we age, we tend to suffer more chronic illnesses. The average older person takes 3-4 prescription medications, plus a variety of over-the-counter substances. Consuming alcohol may blunt the effectiveness of some medications, and can lead to serious side effects such as mental confusion, loss of consciousness and even death.

Alcohol Can Contribute To Mood And Sleep Problems:

Older adults are at high risk to develop mood problems due to lifestyle changes. Retirement, loss of significant relationships, and chronic illness are events that increase the risk of depression. The depressant effect of alcohol only compounds the problem. Older persons are also more prone to insomnia. Rather than helping us sleep, alcohol tends to decrease our quality of sleep, causing us to awaken more frequently.
Alcohol Can Hasten Memory Loss:

The most common type of dementia - Alzheimer's Disease - is the result of the premature death of brain cells. Alcohol, even in moderation, has been shown to speed up the rate at which brain cells die. Once a brain cell has died, it cannot be regenerated.

That's certainly food for thought, isn't it? To drink or not to drink.

The following suggestions might help you make a wise decision:

* If drinking alcohol is not an enjoyable or important activity for you, then consider abstaining. Your body and your brain will thank you.

* If you still want to drink, do so only in moderation. That means no more than one drink per day, and no alcohol at all before doing things such as driving, cooking and paying bills.

* Try switching to a less potent type of alcoholic beverage or, better yet, consider switching to a beverage with no alcohol content: such as non-alcoholic beer or wine.

* Listen to your family and friends, and stop drinking if they tell you that they notice any decrease in your mood, your alertness or your ability to function.

Section of Geriatrics and Gerontology
Department of Internal Medicine
University of Nebraska Medical Center
Omaha, Nebraska 68198-1320

(created 2/2003)