

Brought to you by
Altenheim Resource Services

Empowering older adults and caregivers through information, education, and support
Contact us with questions about aging or caregiving issues

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In ten years, the number of older adults (age 65 and over) will outnumber children in the U. S. for the first time. Not only will the demand for health care increase, the rising rates of alcoholism among the elderly will add an additional burden on an already taxed health care system. While many say that drinking alcohol brings a sense of enjoyment, there are many health risks associated with alcohol use among the elderly. According to [American Addiction Centers](#), alcohol use increases the risk of falling and subsequently, increases the risk of hip fractures. In addition, the American Addiction Centers report that drinking alcohol compounds the risks of driving because it impacts reaction time, coordination, eye movement, and information processing abilities which are already impaired because of aging.

Many people may think that alcohol abuse ends when a person reaches a certain age. [Studies](#) indicate that alcohol is the most used drug among older adults, with about 65% of people age 65 and older reporting high-risk drinking which is defined as exceeding daily guidelines at least weekly in the past year. In addition, more than 10% of adults age 65 and older currently binge drink. Spotting the signs of addiction or abuse in the elderly is often difficult. Medical professionals often miss the signs because of stereotypes that alcohol abuse is a problem for only younger age groups.

Life changes among the elderly are often a trigger point for alcohol abuse. They may find themselves in an “empty nest” because the children have left home. Older adults often feel loneliness and isolation caused by loss of friendship (moving away, health issues or death). Sometimes vision and hearing loss can create isolation. In addition, traumatic events like the loss of a spouse, sadness after downsizing or boredom from retirement or lack of socialization can increase a person’s use of alcohol. When a person drinks, endorphins are released in the brain that stimulate feelings of pleasure and happiness. [The Alcohol Rehab Guide](#) offers these as signs of alcohol abuse in an elderly person:

- Drinking as a way to cope with loss or depression.
- Consuming alcohol with prescription and over-the-counter medications.
- Becoming agitated or irritable when they are sober.
- Exhibiting signs of drunkenness, such as slurred speech and the smell of alcohol on their breath or clothes.
- Lying about how many drinks they’ve had.
- Hiding or stashing liquor bottles where they can’t be found.
- Putting themselves or others in danger due to their drinking habits.

Keep in mind that combining alcohol with any medications can have adverse effects. [The American Addiction Centers](#) explores the effects of alcohol when combined with medications.

While we can only scratch the surface of this topic in this brief newsletter, there are many resources available if you know an elderly person showing signs of alcohol abuse. Some of these are listed in an excellent article from [Harvard Medical School](#). Additionally you can find resources at the [National Institute on Alcohol and Alcoholism](#) and [Alcoholics Anonymous](#).