

# Healthy Aging



MEDICATIONS & ALCOHOL



Family, work, hobbies, travel... ALL this can keep you busy! Don't let problems with medications or alcohol slow you down. Take a few simple steps to get the most out of life!

## STEP 1:

### KNOW YOUR MEDICATIONS

Medications should help you feel better or keep you healthy. Are you taking the right medication, at the right dose, at the right time, in the right way?

#### **Taking medications correctly may help you to:**

- Avoid side effects
- Prevent dangerous interactions (poor effects) with alcohol

Get the most out of your medicines by not drinking any alcohol.

## If you take a medication for pain:

- Do not drink while on any pain medication from your doctor.
- Do not take extra medication.
- Talk to your doctor about adjusting your dosage to properly manage your pain over time.

## Here are some tips to help you keep track of your medications:

Make a list of your medications, including those from your doctor, over-the-counter medicines (OTCs), herbal, and dietary supplements.

### **Note:**

- What you take
- When you take it
- Why you take it
- How you take it



**If you ever drink alcohol and are started on a new medication, you can ask your doctor:** “Could there be a dangerous interaction if I drink alcohol while taking this medication?”



## Consider using a medication chart:

- Checking off each dose on a daily list can help you stay on track.
- Bring your list, chart, or all your medications to all of your doctor visits. Ask your doctor if you are taking the right amount and if you still need to take it.

## And remember!

- Take medications only as directed. If you have any questions or side effects, contact your health care provider.
- Don't share medications with others.
- Your doctor, nurse, and pharmacist can answer your questions.

“Over-the-counter” medications (OTCs) and supplements can also cause interactions with other medications and side effects. OTCs and supplements include anything you can buy without a prescription, such as:

- Aspirin and other pain relievers
- Cold or allergy medicine
- Antacids
- Laxatives
- Vitamins and minerals
- Herbal and dietary supplements

## STEP 2:

# FIND OUT THE FACTS ABOUT ALCOHOL

### Did you know?

- Alcohol breaks down more slowly in your body as you age, making the effects of alcohol stronger and longer-lasting.
- Alcohol interacts with some prescriptions and OTCs.
- Alcohol can make health problems worse, such as high blood pressure, acid reflux, liver disease, diabetes, and dementia.
- Alcohol can lead to falls, trouble sleeping, and heart problems.

### You can help prevent problems that can be caused by alcohol.

If you plan to drink a small amount of alcohol on a special occasion, it's important to know how it may affect you.

#### **Talk with your doctor or nurse to find out:**

- If alcohol is safe for you
- How much is safe for you to drink
- If alcohol will interact with your medications



A standard drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of liquor.

If you plan to drink alcohol, the limits are different now that you are over 65, even if you are not taking any medications.

- **Healthy men 65 or older:** The way your body now digests alcohol means that your reaction will be stronger and will last longer. It is important to talk to your health care provider about whether you can safely drink alcohol and how much.
- **Healthy women 65 or older:** Women's bodies react more strongly to alcohol. Talk to your health care provider about whether you can safely drink alcohol and how much.

Drinking more than the recommended limit is considered unhealthy.

Here are more tips for preventing interactions with medications:

- Let your doctor or nurse know if you drink alcohol, even if it's just once in a while.
- Do not use alcohol if you take sleeping pills; pain pills; cough or cold medicine; acetaminophen (Tylenol®); pills for anxiety (nerves) or depression; or other medications that might cause an interaction.
- Look for warning labels on medications. Read the information that comes with each medication or talk with your pharmacist. Choose medications that don't contain alcohol, if possible.
- Choose to drink water or a non-alcoholic drink instead of alcohol.
- If you don't drink alcohol now, don't start.



## STEP 3:

### WATCH OUT FOR PROBLEMS

The tips in this brochure can help you prevent medication mistakes and problems with alcohol.

#### Some signs of problems you can watch for:

- Memory troubles
- Unsteadiness on your feet, falls, accidents
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Mood swings or feeling sad

If you think you might have a problem with alcohol or another substance, talk with someone who can help. You can talk with a doctor, nurse, or family member. You can also ask questions or get referrals by calling the Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information and Education Helpline at toll-free: 1-800-327-5050 | TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-439-2370.

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

- Let the person know that you care and that you are concerned. Explain why, such as, “The last time I saw you, you seemed to have trouble keeping your balance.”
- Encourage the person to talk with a health care provider or someone else who can help.

#### To protect yourself, your loved ones, and your pets, it is best to keep your medicines in a locked or secure place.

#### To dispose of unused medications in a safer way:\*

- Keep medications in their original containers. Leave drug names visible to help identify the contents if they are accidentally swallowed. Cross





- out other personal information on labels to make it unreadable.
- Disguise the medications in their containers:
  - For pills: add some water or soda to dissolve them.
  - For liquids: add inedible material like cat litter, coffee grounds, or dirt.
- Close the lids and secure with tape.
- Check [www.mass.gov/DrugDropbox](http://www.mass.gov/DrugDropbox) to see if there is a permanent medication collection site in your town or city. If not, hide medication containers in the trash. DO NOT put them in your recycle bin!

*\*The information sheet that came with your medication may tell you to flush it down the drain. For instance, these drugs should be flushed away because they are dangerous to other people and pets:*

*Actiq (fentanyl citrate)*

*Daytrana Transdermal Patch (methylphenidate)*

*Duragesic Transdermal System (fentanyl)*

*OxyContin Tablets (oxycodone)*

*Avinza Capsules (morphine sulfate)*

*Baraclude Tablets (entecavir)*

*Reyataz Capsules (atazanavir sulfate)*

*Tequin Tablets (gatifloxacin)*

*Zerit for Oral Solution (stavudine)*

*Meperidine HCl Tablets*

*Percocet*

*(Oxycodone and Acetaminophen)*

*Xyrem (Sodium Oxybate)*

*Fentora (fentanyl buccal tablet)*

## STEP 4:

### GET THE SUPPORT YOU NEED

Getting support — and giving support to others — can be good ways to prevent problems and stay healthy.

#### Here are some suggestions:

- If you have questions, getting help can be just a phone call away. Use the resources listed in this section.
- Get involved in free or low-cost activities at a recreational or senior center, place of worship, or other organization.
- Help others, volunteer.
- Pursue hobbies: work in a garden, cook, read, or listen to books on tape.
- Make new friends. Saying “hello” is often enough to start a friendship.

#### Resources

##### **MEDICATION INFORMATION & ASSISTANCE**

##### **Massachusetts Prescription Advantage Program**

**Toll-free:** 1-800-AGE-INFO or 1-800-243-4636  
[www.800ageinfo.com](http://www.800ageinfo.com)

Information on the state’s prescription medication program for elders and other elder services and programs, including local senior centers

##### **MCPHS Pharmacy Outreach Program**

**Toll-free:** 1-866-633-1617  
[www.mcphs.edu/pharmacyoutreach](http://www.mcphs.edu/pharmacyoutreach)

Information about free or low-cost prescription programs and answers to health and medication questions; interpreter services available

**Regional Center for Poison  
Control and Prevention serving  
Massachusetts and Rhode Island**

**Toll-free:** 1-800-222-1222  
**TTY:** 1-888-244-5313  
[www.maripoisoncenter.com](http://www.maripoisoncenter.com)

*24 hours a day*

Information and hotline about possible overdoses or poisonings (In immediate danger call 911 or your local emergency number)

**SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER  
INFORMATION & TREATMENT**

**Massachusetts Substance  
Abuse Information and  
Education Helpline**

**Toll-free:** 1-800-327-5050  
**TTY:** Use MassRelay at 711 or  
1-800-439-2370  
[www.helpline-online.com](http://www.helpline-online.com)

*Seven days a week, interpreter  
services available*

Information and referrals on alcohol and drug abuse services, self-help programs, and related concerns

**HEALTH INFORMATION**

**Massachusetts Health  
Promotion Clearinghouse**

**Toll-free:** 1-800-952-6637  
**TTY:** Use MassRelay at 711 or  
1-800-439-2370  
[www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse](http://www.mass.gov/maclearinghouse)

Free copies of this brochure and other resources in many languages

**Massachusetts Department  
of Public Health, Division of  
Prevention and Wellness**

1-617-624-5070  
**TTY:** 1-617-624-5992  
[www.mass.gov/dph/  
healthpromotion](http://www.mass.gov/dph/healthpromotion)

Information on opportunities for older people to learn more about their health



**Commonwealth of  
Massachusetts Department  
of Public Health**

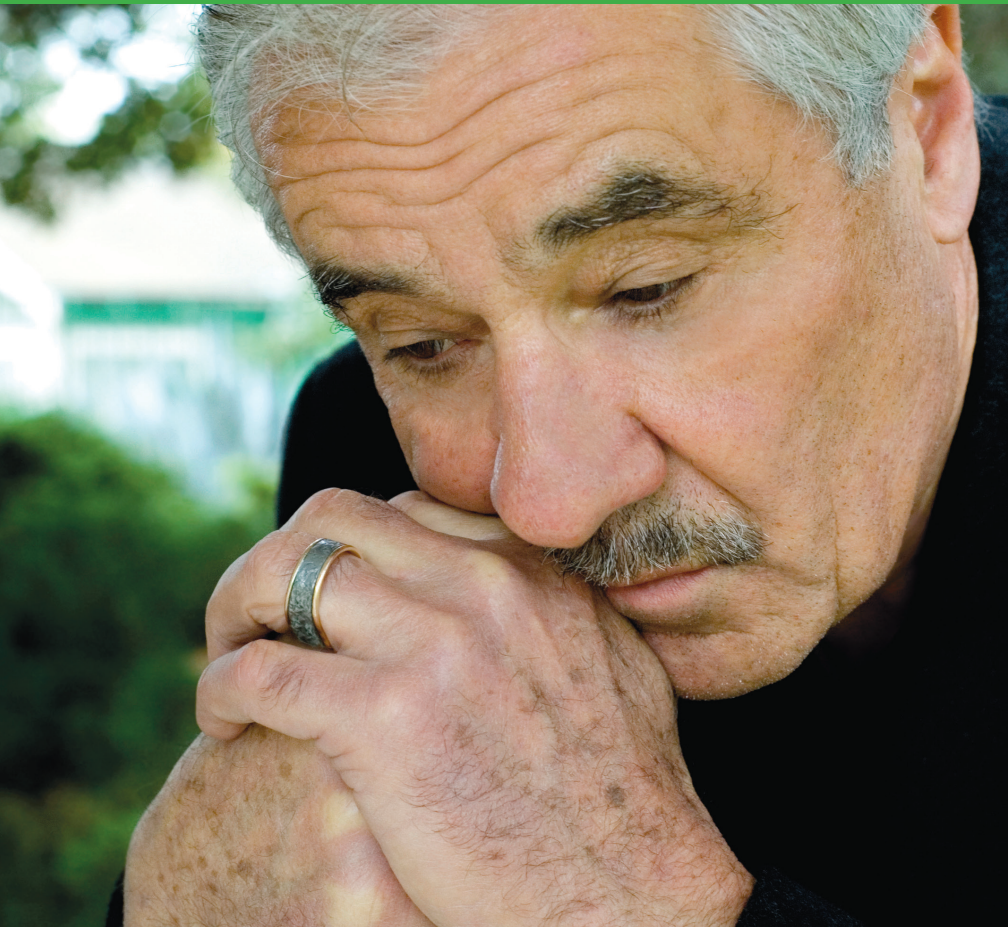




# Feel older and wiser about most things? *What about alcohol and other drugs?*

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Simple questions. Straight answers about  
the risks of alcohol and drugs for older adults.



## Why am I being asked about alcohol and other drugs?

These questions are part of good health care, just like asking about tobacco use, diet, and exercise. It's important to be honest about how much you drink and which drugs you use. That way your health care provider can help you learn about your risk factors and can offer you the best care.

## When it comes to alcohol and other drugs, why are older people different?

As you age, your body can't process alcohol or drugs the way it did when you were younger. You may feel stronger effects sooner, and for a longer time. Balance can become a problem and may lead to falls. Other age-related changes may also make you more sensitive to alcohol and drugs. Alcohol or other drugs may make your medications too strong or too weak. For better health and safety, it may help to know about the different ways alcohol and drugs can affect you now.



## What is moderate drinking for adults 65 or older?

- Men 65 or older: The way your body now processes alcohol means that effects may be more intense and last longer.
- Women 65 or older: Women's bodies react more strongly to alcohol than men's.
- A standard drink is 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of liquor.

Talk to your health care provider about whether you can safely drink alcohol, and how much.

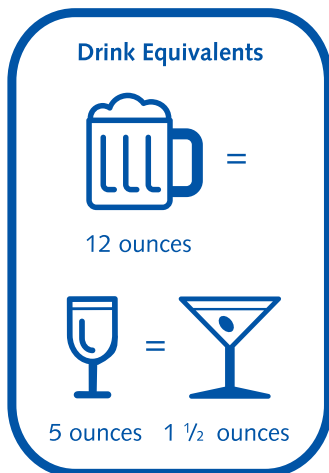
**The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) recommends that both men and women age 65 and over consume no more than one standard drink/day and no more than seven standard drinks/week.**

Keep in mind: Drinking above the limits your doctor recommends is unhealthy.

### What is a standard drink?

- 1 can (12 oz.) of beer or ale
- 1 glass (5 oz.) of wine
- 1 single shot (1 1/2 oz.) of hard liquor (vodka, tequila, whiskey, scotch, rum)
- 1 small glass (4 oz.) sherry or liqueur

These are the standard measures, but you may be served a different amount.



## Who should not use alcohol at all?

Those who:

- Have certain health conditions, like hepatitis C.\*
- Take medications that interact with alcohol, like muscle relaxants or some pain medicines.\*
- Plan to drive or use heavy machinery, like lawnmowers.
- Have a history of problems with alcohol and/or drugs.

\*Ask your doctor/pharmacist if it is safe for you to use alcohol.

## Is it true that alcohol levels stay higher for a longer time in a person 65 or older?

Yes. Older adults often have less muscle mass and less total body water, so alcohol levels go up faster and stay high longer than in a younger person.

## What about marijuana?

We're still learning about how marijuana affects older adults. We do know that it, too, can affect older adults more quickly and for a longer time. We also know that smoking marijuana regularly is associated with airway inflammation and chronic bronchitis.





We don't know yet how marijuana in food (edible) may affect your digestive system. We do know that when used with food it takes longer to feel the effects. Sometimes people use too much and that can cause serious health problems.

**It's safest to store marijuana — especially edibles — safely away from grandchildren and pets.**

## **What facts about alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs should I keep in mind now that I'm older?**

They can:

- Interact with some prescriptions and over-the-counter medicines.
- Make high blood pressure and diabetes harder to control.
- Lead to strokes, memory problems, and dementia. Alcohol use can also lead to liver disease.
- Affect your balance and that may cause falls.
- Cause sleep problems or make sleep problems worse.

## **Is it ever safe to use someone else's prescription medications?**

No. Prescription medicines are legal and treat health problems. But using medicine that was prescribed for someone else for any reason could harm your health and may lead to drug misuse problems or overdose.

**Also it is never safe to share your medicines with anyone else.**

## What's the best way to stay safe with my medicines?

Know what medicines you take.

- Always take them as directed. Don't split or take extra doses.
- Don't share your medicine with others.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist what to do if you miss a dose. This could be different for different medicines.
- Ask your doctor to review your prescriptions at each visit.
- Make sure you still need all the medicines you are currently taking.
- Read the instructions that come with your medicines carefully or ask your pharmacist to go over them with you.
- Ask if you should take medicine with food and whether it's safe to drink alcohol or use marijuana while you are taking it.
- Be sure all your doctors know about all the prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines, marijuana or other drugs, herbs, or supplements you're taking and how many drinks you have on a drinking day.
- Keep medications with addiction potential (such as opioids) in a locked medication box.

## How can I prevent problems with alcohol?

Always tell your doctors and other health care providers if you drink alcohol, even if it's only once in a while. Ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist how alcohol will interact with your medicines. If it is OK for you to have alcohol, it may be a good idea to eat something before, and while you are having a drink. Remember to drink slowly. If alcohol will interact with your medicine, have a non-alcoholic drink like soda or sparkling water instead.

## Is it safe to use alcohol, marijuana or other drugs if I take sleeping pills, pain pills, or pills to calm my nerves?

Always check all the warning labels on all your medicines. It's important to talk to your doctor or pharmacist. He or she can tell you what's best to keep you safe and healthy.

## Can over-the-counter medicines cause problems with prescription medicines?

Sometimes. They may make the medicine your doctor prescribes too strong or too weak. Or they may cause a reaction that makes you sick.

Over-the-counter medicines include anything you buy without a prescription, like aspirin, cold and allergy medicine, herbs or vitamins. Ask your doctor or pharmacist what's safe for you.



## Is it ever safe to use drugs like cocaine, meth, or other 'club drugs'?

Drugs like these are never safe to use no matter what your age. What's in them can change from use to use. This makes it very hard to know exactly what you are using and how your body might react to it. It is very dangerous to mix drugs like these with alcohol, marijuana, or prescription medicines. You may also find yourself dealing with the police and the court system.



## How can I keep track of my prescription drugs so I don't make mistakes?

Make a list of all the medicines you take, what times you take them, and why you are taking them. You can use weekly or day-by-day pill boxes that you can get at the pharmacy. There are also apps available to help you keep track of your medications and when to take them. That makes it easier to keep your pills straight.

**If you take pain or anxiety medications it's safest to keep them in a lock box.**



## What should I watch out for that might signal a medicine, alcohol, marijuana or other drug problem?

Slowing down, having less energy, and sleeping less may be a natural part of getting older. But sometimes these changes can signal a problem caused by prescription medicine, marijuana, alcohol, other drugs, or a combination of any of these. If you suffer confusion, poor memory, falls, sleep problems, or depression, it's smart to tell your doctor.

If you start to use more than usual or mostly for the feeling you get, you may be developing a more serious problem. Try to cut back. If you can't, you may want to get help.



## Where can I turn for help?

Help is all around you. You can speak with a family member, doctor, nurse, senior center staff, or clergy member. Check out community, state, and national resources.

### **Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline:**

Telephone: 1-800-327-5050

TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-439-2370

[HelplineMA.org](http://HelplineMA.org)

Provides free and confidential information and referrals for alcohol and other drug misuse problems, related concerns, and opioid overdose prevention.



## Prevent an Opioid Overdose

- Naloxone (Narcan) is available at many pharmacies. Ask your pharmacist.
- *Know the Signs of Overdose* — Save a Life is available to learn signs of overdose, rescue breathing directions, and more guidance. ([mass.gov/MAclearinghouse](http://mass.gov/MAclearinghouse))

## Massachusetts Smokers' Helpline

1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669)

## AA Meetings

[www.aa.org/pages/en\\_US/find-aa-resources](http://www.aa.org/pages/en_US/find-aa-resources)

## NA Meetings

[www.na.org/meetingsearch](http://www.na.org/meetingsearch)

**You can find more information about alcohol and drugs from these resources:**

**Massachusetts Bureau of Substance Addiction Services**

[mass.gov/dph/bsas](http://mass.gov/dph/bsas)

**Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse**

[mass.gov/MAclearinghouse](http://mass.gov/MAclearinghouse)

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

Alcohol and Public Health — [www.cdc.gov/alcohol](http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol)

Injury Prevention and Control — [www.cdc.gov/injury](http://www.cdc.gov/injury)

**National Institute on Drug Addiction (NIDA)**

[www.nida.nih.gov](http://www.nida.nih.gov)

**National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)**

[www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov)

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

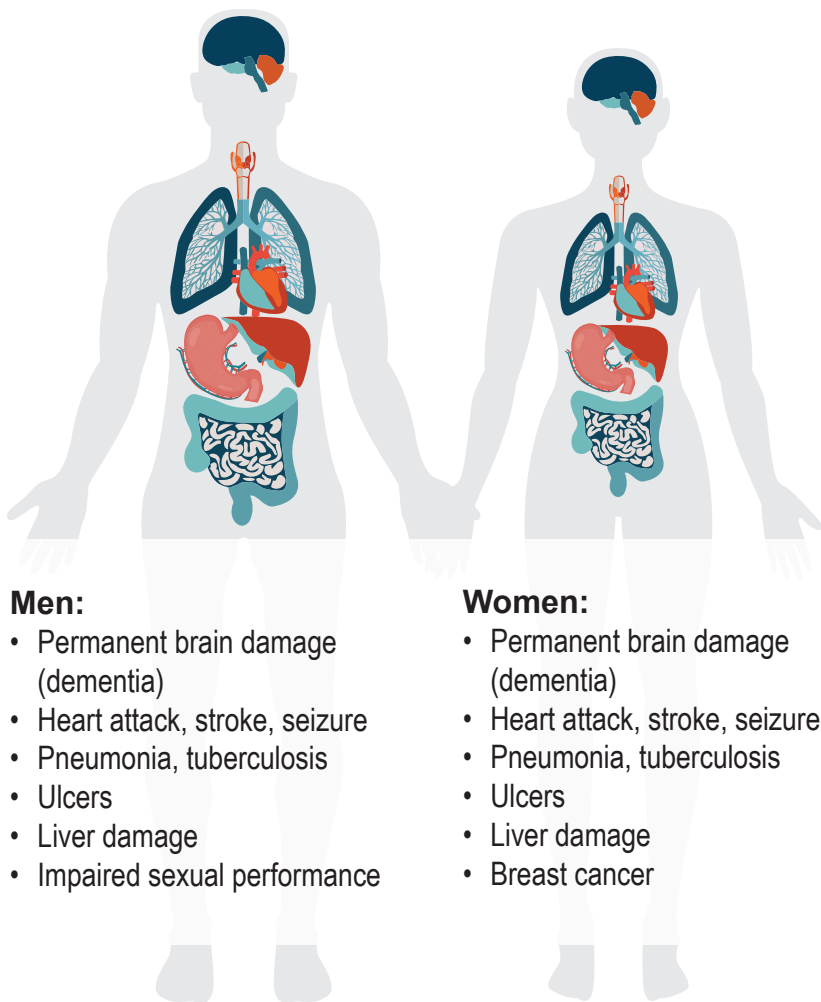
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

## What if someone I know has a problem with alcohol or drugs?

Talk to that person. Show your concern and encourage the person to get help. That person may need to have medicine dosages checked, or may need to cut back or stop using alcohol or drugs. Suggest getting a check-up and speaking with the doctor. Explain that help is available for alcohol and other drug problems. By sharing the information in this brochure, you may help this person become healthier and happier.



# Effects of unhealthy, long-term use of alcohol and other drugs





## **Other risks for men and women**

- Risk of making some medications less effective or cause a reaction
- Alcohol or drug addiction
- Risk of getting HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B or C
- Overdose and death

Women need to be especially careful because their bodies can be affected faster than men's. Medical studies show that women who had 1 or 2 drinks a day increased their risk of breast cancer. Women are also more likely than men to die early from the unhealthy effects of drugs and alcohol.

## Massachusetts Substance Use Helpline:

Telephone: 1-800-327-5050

TTY: Use MassRelay at 711 or 1-800-439-2370

*HelplineMA.org*

