

# Alcohol and Prescription Drug Misuse Among Older Adults

## Understanding the Risks of Combining Alcohol with Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medications

The number of problems associated with the interaction of alcohol and prescription drugs is growing among older adults and is cause for concern. Many people do not understand that aging affects the way the body responds to medications and to alcohol. Often, they confuse the effects of alcohol use for senility, dementia, depression, or other symptoms more common to aging. With this in mind, please take heed of this information, which highlights some of the ways you might unknowingly endanger your health, well-being, and prescription treatment regimen with the use of alcohol.

### These are the facts about medication use.

#### Where do you stand?



**Some 80 to 86 percent of adults over age 65 reportedly suffer from one or more chronic conditions or diseases.**

Do you? Yes  No

**Adults over age 65 take more prescribed medication than any other age group; 30 per cent of this population takes 8 or more prescription medications daily.**

Do you take medication daily?

Yes  No

How many prescription drugs do you take daily? \_\_\_\_\_

**More than any other age group, older adults use over-the-counter medications, primarily for pain.**

Do you use over-the-counter medications?

Yes  No

How many over-the-counter medications do you take daily? \_\_\_\_\_ monthly? \_\_\_\_\_ yearly? \_\_\_\_\_

### These are the facts about alcohol use.

#### Where do you stand?



**One recent national survey showed that about 50 percent of adults over age 65 drink alcohol.**

Do you? Yes  No

**This survey also showed that approximately 25 percent of adults over age 65 drink daily.**

Do you? Yes  No

**Periodic heavy drinking (5 drinks or more on one occasion) and regular heavy drinking (more than 2 drinks for men and 1 drink for women per day) were common among the people who answered the survey.**

Is this a common practice with you?

Yes  No

How many drinks do you have daily? \_\_\_\_\_

How many drinks do you have on any one occasion? \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about alcohol or other drugs, call:

**Illinois Department of Human Services**  
Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse  
**1-866-213-0548 (toll-free Voice)**  
**1-866-843-7344 (toll-free TTY)**

If you have questions about Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) programs or services please call or visit your local Family Community Resource Center (FCRC). We will answer your questions. If you do not know where your FCRC is or if you are unable to go there, you may call the automated helpline 24 hours a day at:

**1-800-843-6154**

1-800-447-6404 (TTY)

You may speak to a representative between:

**8:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.**

**Monday - Friday (except state holidays)**

Visit our website at:

**[www.dhs.state.il.us](http://www.dhs.state.il.us)**



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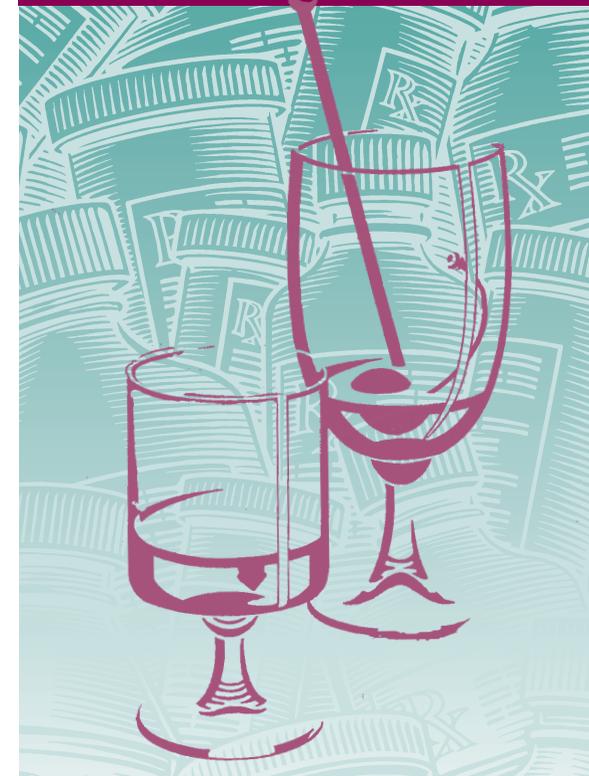
DHS 4637 (R-02-14) Elder Drug Misuse Brochure  
Printed by the Authority of the State of Illinois  
200 copies P.O.#14-1096



State of Illinois  
Department of Human Services

# Alcohol and Prescription Drug Misuse Among Older Adults

## Understanding the Risks of Combining Alcohol with Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medications



## These are the facts about combining alcohol with prescription and over-the-counter medication:

**Any use of alcohol in combination with prescription drug and over-the-counter medication carries risk**, and older adults are particularly vulnerable to harm. In fact, older adults experience more than half of the reported harmful drug reactions that lead to hospitalization. So, if you answered “yes” to the questions in both the prescription drug and alcohol categories, you might be putting yourself at risk for:

- unfavorable drug reactions, such as excessive drowsiness, fainting, impaired breathing, nausea and vomiting, increase in stomach irritation, rapid heartbeats
- overdose
- addictive effects
- interference with how well the medical condition is controlled
- possible change in the effectiveness of the drug.

Have you experienced any of these reactions? Yes  No

List the ones you have experienced:

The fact is, aging affects how the body responds to alcohol. When people age, their metabolism slows down and alcohol and drugs remain in the body longer. This results in an increased risk of overdose. Also, this change in the metabolism prevents older adults from processing the alcohol through the body as well as they did when younger, and so they become intoxicated quicker. At this stage in life, the same amount of alcohol that previously had little effect now can cause intoxication.

Sustained drinking that leads to intoxication eventually slows down reaction time, causes confusion, loss of balance and coordination, and drowsiness. These conditions may be responsible for some of the car accidents, falls, and other injuries that trouble older adults.



Finally, the interaction of age-related physical changes and the consumption of alcohol can trigger or worsen serious problems and cause the following:

- increased risk of high blood pressure and heart problems
- increased risk of strokes
- decreased capability to combat infection and cancer
- increased risk for cirrhosis and other liver diseases
- decreased bone density
- increased risk for depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems
- increased risk for malnutrition
- increased risk for sleep disorders

Lifestyle changes in aging also can make people more vulnerable to alcohol use as they face potential isolation and loss of mobility. This vulnerability increases as older adults undergo key life transitions (menopause, retirement, death of a spouse) or as they take on new and stressful roles, such as caring for an ailing relative or young grandchildren. These changes create situations where drinking alcohol can seem a comfort and a way to relieve the stress or loneliness.

## What can you do?

Now you are aware of the ways in which aging affects your body’s response to the combination of alcohol and medications. You also know where you stand relative to this behavior. If you decide that you need to make some changes based on this information, here are some suggestions:

- Stop using alcohol and make note of the differences in your general well-being.
- Take this brochure to your health care provider and discuss the information as well as the notes you made. Follow their advice and keep them updated on improvements and changes.
- Discuss this information with family members and share any concerns you might have about your health with them. Let them know that you plan to stop drinking, and ask for their help and support.
- Find alternatives to drinking alcohol.
- Get help from your physician or health care provider if you feel you cannot stop drinking on your own.
- Share this information with friends in your age group.