Adults of any age can have problems with alcohol. In general, older adults don't drink as much as younger people, but they can still have trouble with drinking.

As people get older, their bodies change. They can develop health problems or chronic diseases. They may take more medications than they used to. All of these changes can make alcohol use a problem for older adults. Even a Small Amount Can Be Dangerous

Drinking even a small amount of alcohol can lead to dangerous or even deadly situations. Drinking can impair a person's judgment, coordination, and reaction time. This increases the risk of falls, household accidents, and car crashes. Alcohol is a factor in 60 percent of fatal burn injuries, drownings, and homicides and in 40 percent of fatal motor vehicle crashes, suicides, and fatal falls. People who plan to drive, use machinery, or perform other activities that require attention, skill, or coordination should not drink.

Older Adults are Sensitive to Alcohol's Effects

As people age, they may become more sensitive to alcohol's effects. One reason is that older people metabolize, or break down, alcohol more slowly than younger people. So, alcohol stays in their bodies longer. Also, the amount of water in the body goes down with age. As a result, older adults have a higher percentage of alcohol in their blood than younger people after drinking the same amount of alcohol.

Aging lowers the body's tolerance for alcohol. This means that older adults can experience the effects of alcohol, such as slurred speech and lack of coordination, more readily than when they were younger. An older person can develop problems with alcohol even though his or her drinking habits have not changed.

Drinking and Driving

Adults of all ages who drink and drive are at higher risk of traffic accidents and related problems than those who do not drink. Drinking slows reaction times and coordination and interferes with eye movement and information processing. People who drink just a moderate amount can have traffic accidents, possibly resulting in injury or death to themselves and others. Even without alcohol, the risk of crashes goes up starting at age 55. Also, older drivers tend to be more seriously hurt in crashes than younger drivers. Alcohol adds to these age-related risks.

In all states, it is against the law for people to drive if their blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is above a specific level. Blood alcohol concentration measures the percentage of ethanol -- the chemical name for alcohol -- in a person's blood. The higher the BAC, the more impaired a person is. The amount of alcohol consumed, gender, weight, and body fat all affect a person's BAC. A BAC below the legal limit can still impair driving skills. Some people are impaired even when they don't think they are. If you plan to drive, don't drink. If you drink, let someone else who has not been drinking do the driving.

For more information, go to http://nihseniorhealth.gov/index.html.

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