

# alcohol & older adults

## supporting health and life



Many adults enjoy a drink when socializing, relaxing, or celebrating. Seniors can continue to enjoy alcohol if they carefully monitor their use. It is important for seniors to understand how alcohol can affect their health as they age, and consider what low-risk drinking means for them.

### Alcohol, health and medications

As we get older, our bodies process alcohol more slowly, and we become more sensitive to the effects of alcohol. With advancing age there is a tendency to lose lean body mass, resulting in less water in the body to dilute the alcohol. An age-related decline in the production of an enzyme which helps break down alcohol also places an extra burden on the liver - the major organ involved in processing alcohol.

Many health problems can be aggravated by consuming more than a safe amount of alcohol. These include: high blood pressure, memory loss, mood disorders (e.g. depression, anxiety), diabetes, digestive problems, loss of appetite, osteoporosis and stroke.

Drinking alcohol also distorts vision and hearing and reduces psychomotor skills. It affects alertness, judgment, memory and reaction times. Alcohol consumption also interferes with coordination, mobility and balance, and may result in an unexpected fall.

Almost half of all the prescription drugs taken by older people interact with alcohol. Drinking even small amounts of alcohol can either reduce or neutralize the effect of many over-the-counter drugs or prescribed medications. Some drugs can also intensify the sedative effects of alcohol, increasing drowsiness and reducing motor coordination.

### Considering our patterns of drinking as we age

Some older adults start or increase drinking later in life due to life altering events such as the loss of a friend, a pet, a job, their health, mobility, or the family home. Social isolation, boredom, and long stretches of leisure time can also trigger increased alcohol use.

It is important for seniors to understand that the health impacts of alcohol use change as they age. Seniors need to review the Canadian low-risk drinking guidelines for men and women, and carefully monitor their drinking in order to protect their health.

### The Centre for Addictions Research of BC advises older adults as they age to

- adopt lower limits than those recommended for adults in general, so
  - per week, fewer than 10 drinks for women or 15 for men
  - on any occasion, fewer than 3 drinks for women or 4 for men
- check with a doctor or a pharmacist before using alcohol when taking medication

### According to the Canadian Addiction Survey

- In 2004, 73% of BC residents 65+ years were current drinkers
- Almost 10% of BC residents 65+ years used alcohol above recommended levels for avoiding short-term or longer-term harm

Developed for BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information by:



**University  
of Victoria**

Centre for Addictions  
Research of BC



British Columbia  
Centre of Excellence  
for Women's Health

