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Assistance. Advocacy. Answers on Aging.

Area Agency on Aging District 7, Inc.

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CAREGIVER ASSISTANCE NEWS

“CARING FOR YOU ... CARING FOR OTHERS”

ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE IN SENIORS

AWARENESS IS THE FIRST STEP

As we age, the need to take more and different kinds of medications increases. Growing older means our bodies respond differently to alcohol and medications than when we were younger.

Alcohol slows down brain activity. Because alcohol affects alertness, judgement, coordination, and reaction time, drinking increases the risk of falls and accidents. Some research has shown that it takes *less* alcohol to affect older people than younger ones. Over time, heavy drinking permanently damages the brain and central nervous system, as well as the liver, heart, kidneys, and stomach. Alcohol's effects can make some medical problems hard to diagnose. For example, alcohol causes changes in the heart and blood vessels that can dull pain that might be a warning sign of a heart attack. It also can cause forgetfulness and confusion, which can seem like Alzheimer's disease.

Alcoholism is a disease that includes any of the following four symptoms:

- **Craving** - A need or urge to drink.
- **Loss of control** - Not being able to stop drinking once drinking has begun.

- **Physical dependence** - Withdrawal symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, shakiness, and anxiety after stopping drinking.
- **Tolerance** - The need to drink greater amounts of alcohol to get “high.”

A SAFE LEVEL OF DRINKING

How do you know if you or someone you love is consuming too much alcohol? For most adults, moderate alcohol use is up to **two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women and older people.** (One drink equals one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.)

However, people taking certain over-the-counter or prescription medications and people with medical conditions that can be made worse by drinking should *never* drink.



SELF EVALUATION

How can you tell if you have a drinking problem?

Answering the following four questions can help you find out if you or a loved one has a drinking problem:

- Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
- Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
- Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
- Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?

One “yes” answer suggests a possible alcohol problem. More than one “yes” answer means it is highly likely that a problem exists. If you think that you or someone you know might have an alcohol problem, it is important to see a doctor or other health care provider. They can help you determine if a drinking problem exists and plan the best course of action.

Source: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/>

NEXT ISSUE...MENTAL HEALTH AND SENIORS

The Ombudsman program can handle your concerns about areas such as elder abuse, client care, consumer rights, etc. For more information, call 1-800-582-7277.

For information about Ohio Medicaid programs or to report suspected Medicaid fraud, you may call the Ohio Medicaid Fraud Hotline at 1-800-324-8680.

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Avoiding Problems with Prescription Medications

When used responsibly, prescription medications can measurably improve lives. But these drugs also carry the risk of dependence and addiction—and seniors are particularly vulnerable. The changing metabolisms of older people can intensify the effects of drugs and alcohol. Aging is often characterized by loss and loneliness—two conditions that increase the risk of substance abuse.

Painkillers and sedative labels warn against alcohol use, but an elderly person may forget about the warning. **Even a small amount of alcohol, in combination with certain prescription medications, can suppress breathing—with fatal results.**

It's also essential not to combine drugs—prescription or not—without consulting your health practitioner, or to deviate from the prescribed dosage. Caregivers can help by encouraging older adults to use pain killers and sedatives only when absolutely necessary, and to taper off as soon as they can. **It's equally important to help older adults tackle the underlying problems, and not just treat their symptoms.**



- Remind them to *always* avoid alcohol when taking painkillers or sedatives.
- Encourage them to bring all their medications to their doctor when they go for their yearly checkups, so the physician has a record of exactly what they're taking.
- Check medication use—prescription and over-the-counter—and be sure they understand label warnings and the dangers of drug interaction.
- Encourage them to throw out outdated prescription and over-the-counter medications.
- Know what medications the person in your care is taking, and why.

Source: *Caring.com*

Alcoholic Liver Disease

Alcoholic liver disease ranges from fatty liver, alcoholic hepatitis, to end-stage liver failure. Unfortunately, many alcoholics notice the first symptoms only when severe, life-threatening liver disease is already present. Alcohol-related chronic liver disease accounts for more than 12,000 deaths per year in the United States. The best treatment for alcoholic liver disease is to abstain from alcohol. Even people with advanced liver disease caused by drinking alcohol can significantly improve the disease if they stop drinking.

Source: *The Comfort of Home for Chronic Liver Disease*

Taking Care of Yourself— Dancing for Fun and Fitness

Regular physical activity helps keep your body, including your brain, healthy as you age because exercise increases the level of brain chemicals that encourage nerve cells to grow. Dancing can give you a great mind-body workout. Because dancing requires you to remember dance steps, it improves memory skills. Dancing can help tone your entire body and strengthen bones and muscles. It can improve posture and balance.

Research also has shown that some people with Alzheimer's disease are able to recall forgotten memories when they dance to music they used to know. Dance is great for helping people of all ages and physical abilities get and stay in shape. There's even chair dancing for people with physical limitations. When you go to a dance studio, community recreation center or a senior center for classes, it will also provide opportunities to meet people. Rent a dance video or an armchair dance video for those with limited mobility. Check with your doctor before starting a new exercise program, and then dance for the fun of it.



Resource for You

The National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Routing Service 800-662-HELP (4357)

Speak to a representative concerning substance abuse treatment, request printed material on alcohol or other drugs, or obtain substance abuse treatment referral information in your State.

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

Inspiration

God grant us the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

~Serenity Prayer

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