Alcohol and the Elderly

Alcohol consumption in any age group is a serious health issue, but for the elderly, it generates special hazards. Not only does alcohol trigger or exacerbate the typical risks associated with aging, including dementia, depression, bone fractures, circulatory problems or elevated blood sugar levels, but it can also wreak havoc on a medication regime designed to treat age-related diseases. Moreover, if an elderly patient fails to disclose a habit of alcohol abuse during a doctor’s examination, the chances of receiving appropriate treatment are reduced.

Treatment

According to experts at The National Institute on Aging, the success of alcohol treatment is not age-dependent. The same programs and intervention tactics that work for younger adults are generally as effective when applied to the senior population.

Why seniors are so sensitive to alcohol

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) explains that the level of body water needed to dilute alcohol in the system naturally decreases as people age. As a result, seniors experience a higher, and therefore more dangerous, blood alcohol concentration (BAC), even though they may be consuming no greater quantity of alcohol than earlier in their lives. To avoid the risk of intoxication, NIAAA “recommends that people over age 65 who choose to drink have no more than one drink a day.”

Identifying alcohol abuse

Carol J. Colleran, an authority on diagnosis and treatment of alcoholism, points to a combination of physical, behavioral and psychological warning signs of senior alcoholism not to be ignored. Flushed face, bloodshot eyes, confusion or memory loss, extreme denial of drinking, hostility, falls or stumbling, and withdrawal from family, friends, and activities should prompt concern.
Crossing the Line into Alcohol Abuse
The National Institute on Aging emphasizes that alcoholism in the elderly may not be a disease we look for or expect. We frequently fail to note how modest drinking can accelerate as sadness and loss increase in the later years, or how a parent's occasional nightcap can ease into a daily routine. Age is no guarantee of wisdom when it comes to addiction, so caring friends and relatives should step in with assistance when a problem is suspected.

Alcohol Poses Health Risks with Some Medicines
• Aspirin can cause stomach bleeding; alcohol boosts that risk.
• Drowsiness triggered by certain cold and allergy medications, such as antihistamines, worsens with alcohol.
• Drinking alcohol when taking large doses of the painkiller acetaminophen is linked to a greater incidence of liver damage.

“Even for patients who do not meet diagnostic criteria for alcohol dependence (alcoholism) or alcohol abuse, the combined effects of alcohol and aging increase the risk of falls, fractures, traffic crashes, medication interactions, depression and other medical conditions.”

~Enoch Gordis, M.D.,
Director, National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

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