Alcohol & Older People

A guide for professionals

Updated February 2016
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1. Alcohol in the body

Alcohol is measured in units and different drinks contain a different number of units. So it’s not just the amount people drink that affects them, but also the number of units of alcohol they have consumed.

Alcohol is absorbed into the bloodstream within a few minutes and is carried to all parts of the body including the brain. Stronger drinks like spirits and fizzy drinks such as sparkling cider or champagne are absorbed more quickly.

The effect of alcohol on the body depends on many factors including: how much has been eaten & drunk, their health and the size and weight of the person. Because women are generally smaller and lighter than men, alcohol will affect them to a greater extent.

The body’s ability to process alcohol decreases with age. This is due to the water content in the body decreasing which leads to a higher concentration of alcohol in the body.

Also the rate at which alcohol is broken down in the body slows down. A healthy liver takes around an hour to break down a unit of alcohol, but as people get older, their liver & kidneys become less efficient. This causes alcohol to circulate for longer, so the effects last longer. Therefore even a relatively small amount of alcohol will have an effect on some older people.
2. ‘Safe’ Drinking Levels

The Government new drinking guidelines recommend that:

Men and women drink no more than **14** units a week

NB. These units should be spread across the week rather being saved up and drunk all in one go

A 2011 report by the Royal College of Psychiatrists advised over 65’s not to drink more than 1.5 units a day which roughly equates to half a pint of lager/beer or a small glass (125ml) of wine.

This advice is especially important if older people have health problems (such as diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure, memory loss and mood disorders) or are on medication.

The list below details the number of units in some common drinks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drink</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary strength lager/beer (4%)</td>
<td>pint</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary strength cider (5%)</td>
<td>pint</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red/white wine (12%)</td>
<td>small glass (125ml)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red/white wine (12%)</td>
<td>standard glass (175ml)</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red/white wine (12%)</td>
<td>large glass (250ml)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry &amp; Port (20%)</td>
<td>standard measure (50ml)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gin, vodka, rum &amp; whisky</td>
<td>25ml shot</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gin, vodka, rum &amp; whisky</td>
<td>50ml shot</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evidence suggests that a small amount of alcohol may help with cholesterol and can help protect some people from heart disease.

It should also be remembered that alcohol drunk in moderation can contribute to an older person’s quality of life particularly if the drinking takes place as part of a social activity with other people.
3. Alcohol & Calories

Alcohol has no nutritional value, but it’s high in calories. The stronger the drink, the more calories it will contain. One unit of alcohol equals 56 calories, but when other ingredients are added such as sugar, juice & cream, the calories really start to add up.

For the average adult who drinks, almost 10% of their calorie intake comes from alcohol. In addition alcohol stimulates the appetite so may lead to eating more.

The list below details the number of calories in some common drinks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drink</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Calories</th>
<th>Approx. equivalent to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small Glass of Wine</td>
<td>125mls</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>1 Jammie Dodger biscuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Glass of Wine (12%)</td>
<td>175mls</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>2 custard cream biscuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Glass of Wine (12%)</td>
<td>250mls</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>Crunchie bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer/Lager (4%)</td>
<td>1 pint</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>Crunchie bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Beer/Lager (5%)</td>
<td>1 pint</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>Twirl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cider (4.5%)</td>
<td>1 pint</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>Wispa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whisky/Rum/Vodka/Gin (40%)</td>
<td>35mls</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>1 Chocolate Hob Nob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cream Liqueur (17%)</td>
<td>50mls</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>Crème Egg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port (20%)</td>
<td>50mls</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1 Chocolate Hob Nob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet Sherry (20%)</td>
<td>50mls</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>1 Bourbon biscuit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Why Older People Might Drink Harmfully

A small percentage of older people will have been drinking heavily for many years, however about a third of older people with drinking problems develop them in later life. They may use alcohol to escape from negative feelings and experiences or to help with pain relief. Therefore, the use of alcohol is often a symptom of other problems. The following issues are known to trigger heavy drinking in older people:

- Bereavement
- Becoming a carer
- Pain or discomfort due to conditions such as arthritis
- Loneliness and isolation
- Loss of occupation, skills and income
- Boredom
- Difficulty sleeping
- Less able to get out and about, or fear of going out alone
- Trying to keep warm or to reduce heating bills
- Finding drinking easier than preparing meals
5. Physical Risks of Drinking in Old Age

The following list details some of the problems that alcohol can cause in older people:

**Stomach:** the stomach is irritated by alcohol, which can cause sickness or indigestion and lead to more serious conditions.

**Dehydration:** drinking enough liquid is important for health. However, because alcohol results in more frequent trips to the toilet, body water may be lost causing dehydration.

**Nutrition:** drinking may fill people up, but it doesn’t provide the nourishment that they need.

**Sleep:** an alcoholic drink may help some people to go to sleep, but it may lead to poor quality sleep or upset their sleep pattern.

**Incontinence:** alcohol can increase the likelihood of urinary incontinence.

**Psychiatric problems:** alcohol misuse in old age is often associated with depression, phobias and anxiety.

**Memory loss:** alcohol can contribute to short and long term memory loss.

**Dementia:** alcohol can contribute to dementia – 10% of elderly people presenting with dementia have alcohol-related brain damage.

**Cold:** many people think that having a drink will warm them up, but it doesn’t. Alcohol increases the flow of blood to the skin (which is why people get a *warm glow*) but as a result, they lose heat more rapidly, so drinking can increase the risk of hypothermia.

**Liver:** as people get older, the liver becomes more easily damaged by alcohol.

**High Blood Pressure:** alcohol raises your blood pressure which can be a problem as many older people already have raised blood pressure.

**Weight Gain:** Alcohol has no nutritional value, but is full of calories and can cause people to put on weight. This in turn can impact on older people’s health and mobility.
6. Other Risks of Drinking for Older People

In addition to the physical problems that it causes, alcohol can make older people vulnerable. This can range from increased accidents and falls to an increased likelihood of becoming a victim of crime or abuse.

**Accidents & Falls:** Alcohol affects the vision, coordination and balance, so the risk of having an accident or fall is significantly higher after drinking.

**Hazards in the home:** Alcohol makes people forgetful, which means that there’s an increased risk of doing potentially dangerous things such as leaving the gas hob or the grill on or not putting cigarettes out properly.

**Victim of Crime:** Those who drink heavily are less aware of what’s going on around them. At home they may be more susceptible to bogus callers or rogue traders. If inebriated when out and about, they could be more likely to be targeted by pickpockets or bag snatchers.

**Victim of Abuse:** Because those who drink heavily are less aware of what’s going on around them, they are more open to the risk of financial abuse. In addition, if someone is dependent on alcohol and struggles to buy it for them self, then the person buying it for them can (in some cases) have a great deal of control over them.
6. Mixing Alcohol with Medication

Mixing alcohol and prescribed or over the counter medicines can be dangerous. People are not always aware of the possible interactions between both substances, and as a result could put themselves at risk.

Those taking sedative drugs or antidepressants should avoid alcohol altogether.

Those taking long-term medications should be careful about drinking, as alcohol can make some drugs less effective, meaning long term conditions get worse. Examples include, drugs for epilepsy or diabetes, or drugs like warfarin to thin the blood.

Older people should be encouraged to check the labels or speak to their pharmacist or G.P before drinking.
7. Signs of drinking

Alcohol misuse can present in a number of non-specific ways (such as accidents, depression, insomnia, confused states and self-neglect) many of which are linked to the normal aging process. The list below contains a number of things to look out for;

- Empty bottles or cans either in the rubbish or hidden away in cupboards or under beds
- Smelling of alcohol
- Lack of care in personal hygiene/dress
- Unstable on feet/regular falls
- Lack of money to buy food/basic necessities or debt
8. Why people are not identified or encouraged to get help

The symptoms of alcohol misuse often mimic that of other geriatric illnesses and in some cases alcohol problems are overlooked or misdiagnosed as dementia. However there are other reasons why older people are not identified or encouraged to get help:

- Older people have a tendency to be less accurate in self-reporting their alcohol consumption.
- They may hide their drinking due to shame and embarrassment.
- There is an assumption that older people are not interested in treatment because they do not actively seek it or take up the treatments that are currently on offer.
- People close to the older person ignore problems because they feel that drinking 'is all they've got left in life'.

A reduction in alcohol consumption can have a major impact on the health of an older person and give them a better quality of life, so it’s never too late to make a positive change.

Research shows that those who have begun to drink heavily later in life have greater success in reducing their consumption than those who’ve been drinking heavily for years.

**Nb.** Alcohol is physically addictive. It’s important that heavy drinkers take medical advice before dramatically reducing their consumption, as the effects of withdrawal can be dangerous.
9. Helping to Reduce Isolation

One of the key reasons why older people drink is that they are lonely and feel isolated. Encouraging/enabling them to leave their homes and mix with other people can help reduce their alcohol consumption.

There are a number of local organisations that provide activities and services for older people.

**SMILE** - The borough's SMILE programme is an exercise and activity club for the over 50s. A wide range of activities aimed to improve and maintain mobility and stability are available from venues around the borough. Tel. 01628 685330  Email. smile@rbwm.gov.uk

**U3A** (University of the Third Age) – educational, creative and leisure activities. Windsor: www.windsoru3a.org Maidenhead: www.maidenheadu3a.org

**Community Learning & Skills Service (CLASS)** - promotes learning opportunities in the borough. Its brochure contains a range of practical courses some of which are free. Discounts are available for those in receipt of benefits. Tel. 01628 685647. Email. lifelonglearning@slough.gov.uk


**Shopmobility** - provides manual and powered wheelchairs and scooters to enable people who have difficulty walking to use the shops in Windsor & Maidenhead. Mon-Sat 10am-5pm. Email. shopmobility@people2places.org.uk Windsor: 01753 622330 Maidenhead: 01628 543038

**People to Places: Dial-a-Ride service** - Provides mini bus transport for those not able to easily get around. There is an initial registration fee and a small charge for each journey. Tel. 01628 587920 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-12.30pm). www.people2places.org.uk
Maidenhead and District Talking Newspaper Association - Brings the Maidenhead Advertiser to the visually impaired. Tel. 01628 781870. www.maidenheadtn.org.uk

Windsor Talking Newspapers - Audio versions of articles from the Ascot, Windsor & Eton Express and The Royal Borough Observer newspapers. Tel. 01753 861624

Age Concern, Windsor - Offers a variety of support for the elderly from the Spencer Denney Centre in Windsor. Tel. 01753 860685. Mob. 07749 895736. www.ageconcernwindsor.org.uk

Ascot District Day Centre, Chandler Centre, Sunninghill - Day Centre for the over 50s providing a hot lunch and a range of activities. Monday to Friday, 10am -3pm. Tel. 01344 624923. ascotdaycentre@btconnect.com

Ascot Project - Organises weekly shopping trips on Tuesday mornings from Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale to Camberley, Bracknell & Woking for a small charge. Tel. 01344 626784 or Tel. 01784 471561.

Elizabeth House, Cookham Rise – Day Centre for the over 60s providing a hot lunch and a range of activities Monday to Friday. Tel. 01628 527621.

St Mark’s Methodist Church, Maidenhead – Lunch Club A hot lunch and a range of activities on Thursdays from 10am-3pm. Tel. 01753 822 890.

Cox Green Community Centre, Maidenhead – Lunch Club A hot lunch and a range of activities on Thursdays from 12pm-3pm. Tel. 01753 822890

Old Windsor Centre, Old Windsor Activities including short mat bowls, Tai Chi, bingo, crafts and exercise sessions along with a hot lunch. Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays 9am-3pm. Tel. 01753 854117.

Darby & Joan Club, Old Windsor – Club for older people to meet once a week for tea, bingo, chat and occasional outings. Tel. 01753 864564.
10. Useful Contacts

LOCAL

If you are concerned that somebody has an alcohol problem, encourage them to speak to their GP or get them to call the borough’s Drug and Alcohol Treatment Service based in Maidenhead. Tel. 01628 796733.

Social Services Advice and Information Team
The Advice and Information Team helps people in need of support to remain independent and living in the community. Tel. 01628 683744.

Maidenhead Citizens Advice Bureau
Helps people resolve their legal, money & other problems by providing free, independent & confidential advice. Tel. 03444 111 444. www.citizensadvice.org.uk www.adviceguide.org.uk

Thames Valley Cruse Bereavement Care
Provides free support pre and post bereavement. It also provides walk-in locations, support and friendship groups to help you with your loss. Tel. 01344 411919 www.cruse.org.uk/tvb

SIGNAL for Windsor, Ascot and Maidenhead Carers – provides free information, advice and support for unpaid carers in the Royal Borough. Tel. 01628 947974. Email. waminfo@signal4carers.org.uk www.signal4carers.org.uk

NATIONAL

Drinkline
National alcohol helpline. Tel. 0300 123 1110. www.drinkaware.co.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous
Fellowship of men and women sharing their experience helping others to recover from alcoholism. Tel. 0800 9177 650 www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
Age UK
Information and advice for older people.
Tel. 0800 169 2081 www.ageuk.org.uk

The Silver Line
24/7 helpline which offers information, advice and friendship to older people. Tel. 0800 4 70 80 90 (Tel. 0300 4 70 80 90 from mobile phones).

Victim Support
Confidential help for anyone affected by crime.
Tel. 08081689111. www.victimsupport.org
APPENDIX 1

The 10 questions below can be used by professionals to gauge whether or not an older person has a problem with alcohol.

**Short Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test - Geriatric Version (S-MAST-G)**

**YES (1) NO (0)**

1. When talking with others, do you ever underestimate how much you actually drink?

2. After a few drinks, have you sometimes not eaten or been able to skip a meal because you didn't feel hungry?

3. Does having a few drinks help decrease your shakiness or tremors?

4. Does alcohol sometimes make it hard for you to remember parts of the day or night?

5. Do you usually take a drink to relax or calm your nerves?

6. Do you drink to take your mind off your problems?

7. Have you ever increased your drinking after experiencing a loss in your life?

8. Has a doctor or nurse ever said they were worried or concerned about your drinking?

9. Have you ever made rules to manage your drinking?

10. When you feel lonely, does having a drink help?

**TOTAL S-MAST-G SCORE (0-10) _____**

*Scoring 2 or more ‘yes’ responses is indicative of an alcohol problem.*

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