

## Alcohol Gets More Dangerous as You Get Older

(July 10) — A new UCLA study has supported scientists' concerns that alcohol abuse by the elderly has become a major national health problem.

The researchers found that more than a third of American drinkers age 60 and over are at risk of harm because of alcohol's interaction with their diseases or their medications — or simply because they are imbibing too much.

Among those at risk, a total of about 9 million people, more than half fit into at least two of those risk categories, and almost a third were in all three.

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What's more, those numbers are almost certainly on the conservative side: The UCLA study relied on the 3,300 respondents' own reports as to the quantity and frequency of their drinking.

And experts like Dr. Stephen Ross, director of the division of alcoholism and drug abuse at New York's Bellevue Hospital, believe that the worst is yet to come. The aging of the baby boom generation will add millions more to the ranks of at-risk drinkers — and the rate of alcoholism among boomers is substantially higher than that of earlier generations.

What angers Ross is that the country as a whole is unprepared to cope with this growing threat. "We know how to treat and protect these people," he told AOL News, "but we're not doing it."

Many older drinkers are unaware they even have a problem until it's too late — after they lose their balance and break a hip or pick a fight with a friend or cause a fatal car crash. What they don't understand is that the same amount they drank with no ill effects at age 50 can have double the impact at age 70, drastically altering their state of mind and behavior.

I'm lucky. I noticed one day that the two martinis I used to enjoy some years ago were now giving me something much beyond a pleasant buzz. I mentioned the fact to my doctor, who explained that the levels of the enzyme that breaks down alcohol in the body fall as you age. As a result, higher concentrations of alcohol reach your brain.

Some people, including me, have a negative reaction. For others, the extra bit hits the pleasure centers of the brain, making addiction more likely.

A third of older alcoholics become addicted late in life. That's what happened to a 79-year-old artist friend — call him Fred.

Two years after he retired from his teaching job, a year after his wife of more than 40 years died suddenly, he began sipping vodka — all through the day. "It gave me a nice little glow, kept me going," he says. He did, however, have to take two naps a day, and he got up from them feeling feverish and "wobbly on my feet" for 15 minutes.

Fred had been a longtime smoker and coffee drinker, and a year or two after he started with vodka he joined an anti-smoking group. When he was told that his coffee and alcohol consumption supported his smoking habit, he decided to quit all three. "I went cold turkey," he says. "For three weeks I was completely out of my mind with withdrawal symptoms. Then I was free and clear."

There is a host of reasons why older people may turn to drink: personal loss, ill health, loneliness, feelings of uselessness. Constraints that once kept them sober — the fear of losing a job, for example — have vanished. Many take up serious drinking in retirement communities where the social life revolves around the happy hour. More men than women become alcoholics, but women are more likely to become late-onset addicts.

Research by Bellevue's Ross shows that older alcoholics in treatment programs had better attendance records and better adherence to anti-abuse medications than their younger counterparts. Nevertheless, most of the people who receive medical treatment for alcoholism around the country are young.

Even though the Food and Drug Administration has approved three drugs for dealing with alcoholism, they are prescribed for only a tiny fraction of alcoholics of any age. In part, that's because physicians typically do not screen their older patients for alcohol use and abuse. Another reason: The problem is difficult to diagnose since its symptoms — insomnia, frequent falls, memory loss — mimic those of other age-related ailments.

Many alcoholics in search of help attend 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, which has traditionally required that its meetings be open to addicts of all ages. More recently, individual AA groups have begun sponsoring meetings specifically for the elderly. They say that alcoholics in their 70s have substantively different problems from those in their 20s.

"America in general has been terribly slow to respond to the needs of elderly alcoholics," Ross says. "It's especially frustrating because studies have shown that just a brief intervention by a physician or nurse practitioner, simply talking to them about their problem, can have a clinically significant impact."

I still have one martini from time to time, but that's where I draw the line. It turns out you *can* have too much of a good thing.

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