

an introduction

Did You Know?

Alcohol is the drug most commonly used by older adults. Currently, fifty-eight per cent (58%) of women and 73% of men over the age of 65 consume alcohol, either occasionally or regularly. Over one half of people aged 75 and older also drink. Alcohol use does not cause difficulties in the lives of most older adults. However,

- 6-10% of older adults experience alcohol problems,
- the rates of problems are much higher among older people with mental health problems, those coming to emergency departments, and those in geriatric units (ranging from 18%-33%), and
- only a small percentage of older adults with alcohol problems receive help (in many communities, as little as 2%).

Understanding the Situation

An alcohol problem for an older adult can be a long-standing situation, or one that developed recently. For some people, drinking has been their way of responding to crises throughout their lives.

As people age, their bodies metabolize alcohol more slowly. Even relatively small amounts of alcohol can negatively affect some older adults' health. Alcohol also adversely interacts with over 150 medications commonly prescribed to older adults.

As with younger persons, alcohol misuse among older adults may lead to deterioration in the person's health, family and social stability, and the person's ability to cope with daily life situations. Alcohol problems are closely tied to the older person's ability to remain independent.

Meeting the Need

Helping older adults who have alcohol problems often takes a collaborative approach, as well as the

recognition that there are important differences as a result of the aging process that can affect the older person's ability to access and receive help.

Alcohol is often one of a number of inter-related challenges in the person's life. It is very important to look at more than "just the alcohol". Alcohol problems often overlap with physical and mental health, housing, and financial difficulties.

At work or in their personal lives, many people know of an older adult who is experiencing a problem with alcohol. Alcohol is a common health and social issue, directly affecting up to a quarter million older adults across Canada. It can also negatively affect older adults' families and friends, as well as service providers who care about them. As Canada's population ages, the numbers of older adults with alcohol problems will increase significantly.

People wanting to help may be unsure how to begin. They may have tried to help in the past and found the attempt frustrating, or considered the situation hopeless. People may not have been able to find anyone in the community who knew how to help. Often the appropriate services are not there, or these are stretched thin.

This Best Practices series can be a starting point for understanding alcohol problems in later life and helping older adults. The information series treats an alcohol use problem as a community health issue that needs to be discussed in an open and normalizing manner. The series underscores alcohol use problems as important physical, psychological and social health issues for older adults.

What are Best Practices?

During the past two decades, there have been significant strides made in understanding the ways in which alcohol and other substance use problems develop among older adults, the reasons why the problems can develop, and effective methods of helping.

This Best Practices series identifies approaches that result in the most successful outcomes, as well as offering promising prevention and health promotion strategies for older adults. The series of information sheets represents a growing consensus of opinion on what works and what does not. The series brings together the knowledge and insights of

- older adults,
- health care and other service providers,
- specialists in aging, and
- specialists in addictions from across Canada.

The series combines the best of aging research, addictions literature and practice, with consumers' and service providers' trial and error experiences. It identifies approaches and concrete strategies that make sense given the diversity of older adults and the fact that most Canadian communities do not have specialized addiction services for older adults.

Helping older adults with alcohol use problems requires an integrated community approach where older adults, community organizations, health agencies, addiction workers, and other professionals work together to

- improve the available information to prevent alcohol problems from developing among older adults, and
- enhance the resources to deal with the many alcohol related issues that affect older adults' lives (such as depression, isolation, bereavement, loss of roles, health changes, as well as ageism and the stigma often associated with alcohol problems).

The information sheets can help to give a better understanding of the challenges that older adults with alcohol problems are facing. The series also offers direction in reaching out to older adults and in developing appropriate resources in almost any community.

Older adults with alcohol problems have many of the same needs as other people. At the same time, there can be important differences in older adults' lives and circumstances.

The series also provides best practice information on working with special groups of

older adults who have alcohol problems, including

- women,
- people who have concurrent mental health problems,
- people are homeless,
- adults who are cognitively impaired,
- adults living in rural communities,
- people living in nursing homes, and so on.

The series shares strategies and offers best practices on how to recognize alcohol problems among older adults. It provides insights on how to reach older adults and address this health problem effectively from a prevention, treatment, and community development perspective.

Why Should I Be Interested?

These information sheets are intended to provide people with practical ideas and concrete suggestions. This information can help build skills, enhance professional and volunteer efforts to do the best work possible with older adults and reduce frustrations in service delivery. Following best practices can help reduce barriers to assistance. It can help assure that older adults are not excluded, get fair treatment in receiving addiction and other services, and receive appropriate help. When an older adult is offered help in a way that understands and meets his or her needs, the person can experience identifiable changes in health and other parts of life.

Who are the Best Practice Sheets For?

The series will be useful to a wide range of persons who are in contact with older adults, including physicians and other health care providers, people in addictions services, seniors' organizations, community health and social service agencies.

Using and Sharing This Information

You are welcome to copy and share this material, but it cannot be used for commercial purposes.

This is the first in a series of Best Practices Information Sheets developed by the Seeking Solutions Project, © 2004, funded by Health Canada and the National Population Health Fund. For more information, visit: www.agingincanada.ca.