

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: Research Says Drinking Alcohol is Harmful at any Age

A recent article in the New York Times discusses recent research published by the Center for Addiction Research & Education at the University of Florida on the effects of alcohol on health for even light or occasional drinkers. Researchers say as you get older, the risks become greater — even with the same number of drinks. Alcohol affects virtually every organ system in the body including muscles and blood vessels, digestive system, heart and brain. It particularly impacts older adults, because there's already some decline or impact in those areas.

Research on substance use and aging maintains there's a whole different set of health risk factors for older drinkers. People might not realize that the drinks they used to tolerate well are now affecting their brains and bodies differently. Alcohol can present new problems in older ages, particularly at 65 and up — for even light or occasional drinkers. Older adults tend to have less muscle mass and retain less water in their tissues compared with younger people, which can increase blood alcohol concentration. This means it takes fewer drinks for older people to feel intoxicated and heightens the risk of severe injury from fall. Older people also show deficits in working memory at lower blood alcohol concentrations than younger drinkers. Additionally, drinking alcohol can increase the risk of developing chronic conditions like diabetes, dementia, cancer, heart disease and hypertension.

Drug interactions also come into play. Mixing alcohol with prescription medicines that older adults commonly take, such as those for treating diabetes or hypertension, can make the medications less effective or cause harmful side effects, like ulcers or an irregular heartbeat. Benzodiazepines, when combined with alcohol, can slow breathing and act as a powerful sedative. Even over-the-counter medication can be dangerous. Aspirin, which some older people take to reduce cardiovascular disease risk (despite the potential side effects), can lead to severe gastrointestinal bleeding, which older people are already at higher risk for.

Alcohol use appears to have risen in recent years, though national trends are difficult to track outside of self-reported surveys. A federal survey from 2023 found that 12 percent of adults 65 and older — about seven million people — reported drinking at least four or five drinks in a sitting in the previous month.

After decades of mixed messaging around alcohol's health harms and benefits, recent studies have made it clear that no amount of alcohol is good for you. The available studies attempting to establish exactly how much alcohol it takes to drive up health risks in older populations use different benchmarks for moderate drinking, making it challenging to draw a consensus.

Researchers advise that adults 65 and older should consume no more than one drink per day and no more than seven per week. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines moderate drinking for adults of all ages as two drinks or less per day for men, and one drink or less per day for women.

All the experts emphasized that older people should pay close attention to their bodies' response to alcohol, and to stop drinking or cut back if they feel like it's affecting them more physically or cognitively.

The SAFE Glen Cove Coalition was formed in 2003 to change societal norms about alcohol and substance use. The Coalition is concerned about excessive alcohol use in youth and adults and seeks to educate the community about its negative effects on one's health and wellness. To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us on www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about Alcohol and its negative consequences please visit www.safeglencove.org.