

# New study sheds light on excessive drinking among the elderly

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One out of ten elderly adults on Medicare reports drinking more alcohol than is recommended, according to a new study from Brandeis University.

“Even though alcohol problems are more prevalent in younger people, a substantial proportion of older adults are consuming alcohol in amounts that exceed recommended guidelines,” said study co-author Elizabeth Merrick, senior scientist at Brandeis University’s Heller School for Social Policy and Management. The study sheds light on a complex problem that has received scant attention and is often missed by health care and other providers, she said.

Published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, the study evaluated data about 12,413 Medicare beneficiaries aged 65 or older. Merrick and her colleagues found that 9 percent engaged in unhealthy drinking—consuming more than thirty drinks per month, or drinking four or more drinks on any day in a typical month. The study, based on a 2003 Medicare survey, also reported that two-thirds of beneficiaries do not drink, while one-quarter drink within the recommended guidelines.

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and the American Geriatrics Society, risky drinking among those 65 years and older occurs when a person consumes more than seven drinks per week or more than three drinks on a single day. Other guidelines suggest that the single-occasion drink limit should be no more than two drinks, and that women should drink even lower overall

amounts than men.

Merrick said some older people may not be aware that recommended limits are lower than for younger people. Older adults are more sensitive to alcohol and less able to metabolize it, both of which contribute to adverse effects at any level of drinking. Alcohol can exacerbate some medical problems, reduce a person's ability to function, increase the risk of falls, and negatively interact with medication.

“The relationship between alcohol consumption and risk is complex. Our study focused only on amounts of alcohol consumed. There are many people for whom lower amounts or even any amount of alcohol may constitute a serious risk because of specific medical problems or medication interactions,” explained Merrick. “All of these factors must be taken into account, along with the perhaps more highly publicized benefits of moderate drinking for some people.”

Source: Brandeis University

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