

# Experts note rise in alcohol use among older adults

September 27 2021, by Dawn Sugarman, Shelly Greenfield

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As the baby boomer generation moves into retirement age, it is expected that by the year 2034, [older adults \(ages 65 and up\) will outnumber children](#) in the United States for the first time in history. As the

population ages, demand for health care will increase, and rising rates of alcohol use in older adults may create additional challenges to an already burdened health care system.

## **Trends in alcohol use in older adults**

Alcohol use in [older adults](#) has been [trending upward over the years](#), particularly among women. One epidemiologic survey determined that in the United States between 2001 and 2013, among people 65 and older, the rate of [alcohol use](#) disorder increased 107 percent. The University of Michigan's 2021 [National Poll on Healthy Aging](#) found that although the majority of older adults surveyed were drinking alcohol at low to moderate levels, there was a subset of older adults exceeding the recommended guidelines for alcohol use. In particular, 20 percent of respondents drank alcohol four or more times per week; 27 percent reported having six or more drinks on at least one occasion in the past year; and 7 percent reported alcohol-related blackouts.

## **Negative effects of alcohol use in older adults**

Drinking too much alcohol can have [negative physical and mental health consequences](#), including heart and [liver problems](#), memory issues, mood disorders, as well as an increased risk of cancer and a weakened immune system. In addition, age-related changes in the body place older adults who drink alcohol at [additional risk](#). Older adults have increased sensitivity to the effects of alcohol because they typically metabolize alcohol more slowly. Lean body mass also declines with age, and with less muscle to absorb alcohol, older adults feel the effects of alcohol more quickly, even with consumption of lower amounts of alcohol than when they were younger. [Older women are at higher risk](#) of these effects compared with older men. Combined with other [physical changes](#) in the body

due to age, older adults who drink alcohol are susceptible to falls, bone fractures, and other unintentional injuries. Given that many older adults are taking multiple [prescription medications](#), another important concern for this age group is the dangerous and sometimes fatal consequence of mixing medications with alcohol.

## Older adults' alcohol use and the COVID-19 pandemic

[Emerging evidence](#) indicates that individuals in the United States and globally are increasing their alcohol use in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. [Research](#) that has examined older adults' alcohol use during the early phases of the pandemic has generally found that compared to younger adults, older adults report smaller increases in alcohol use. However, a national survey study and [a study of social media users](#) both found that older adults reporting depression and anxiety symptoms during the pandemic were more likely to increase their alcohol use than those without these symptoms.

## Tips and resources for older adults

- If you drink alcohol, follow the [2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#): men should consume no more than two [standard drinks](#) in a day, and women should consume no more than one standard drink in a day. A standard drink is defined as having 14 grams of alcohol, which is generally contained in 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of spirits. These [dietary guidelines](#) are for those without any other contraindications; individuals who are taking medications that interact with alcohol, or those who are managing a medical or mental health condition that can

be made worse by drinking, should avoid drinking alcohol entirely.

- **If you have depression, anxiety, or another mental health condition, consider not drinking alcohol, as it can worsen these symptoms. Similarly, if you have problems with sleep you should avoid alcohol, as it can disrupt sleep.**
- **If you would like to learn more about your own drinking, visit the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's (NIAAA) [Rethinking Drinking](#) site.**
- **To learn out more about treatment options for alcohol use disorder, visit NIAAA's [Treatment Navigator](#) website.**
- **Avoid social isolation. If physical distancing is necessary due to COVID-19 safety precautions, reach out to friends and family via phone, video, or in outdoor settings.**
- **If you are feeling overwhelmed by depression, anxiety, or loneliness, seek professional [help](#).**
- **For a list of additional healthy aging resources, visit the [US Department of Health and Human Services website](#).**

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