

## What you should know about alcohol

Kathy Laufer, LICSW

Anyone can have a drinking problem. Families and physicians often overlook drinking problems in older adults with excuses such as “she’s always had a few cocktails” or “she just needs a drink to help her get to sleep”. Having a daily drink may be too much for some elders – having more than one can be a real problem. According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, “the **maximum** recommended drinking limit for older adults is no more than one drink per day: one **5 oz.** glass of wine, **12 oz** can of beer, or a single shot – **1.5 oz** of hard liquor.”

Neglecting drinking problems can place an elder at great risk for falls and accidents since alcohol affects coordination, reaction time, alertness and judgment. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [NIAAA] reports that heavy drinking can result in forgetfulness and confusion or even permanent brain, liver, heart, kidney, and stomach damage. [www.niaaa.nih.gov] Mixing alcohol with prescription or over-the-counter medications increases the risk of harm. Alcohol in combination with sleeping pills, pain killers and antihistamines can be fatal. “For example, aspirin can cause bleeding in the stomach and intestines; when aspirin is combined with alcohol, the risk of bleeding is much higher.” [NIAAA]

To determine if you have a drinking problem, ask yourself the following:

- Do I drink to calm my nerves, forget my worries or reduce depression
- Have I lost interest in food
- Do I drink quickly – gulping it down
- Do I try to hide my drinking from others
- Do I drink alone more often
- Does alcohol sometimes make it hard for me to remember parts of the day or night
- Do I feel irritable or unreasonable when not drinking
- Does drinking decrease my shakiness
- Do I have medical, social or financial problems caused by drinking
- Have I ever hurt myself or someone else while drinking

If you answer yes to any of the above, it is time to talk with your physician about your concern. Older drinkers have a great chance of recovery, but it is important to get treatment. To find out more about resources you can call the Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information & Education Hotline at 1-800-327-5050 or call Kathy Laufer at the senior center, 617-796-1660.