



Older Adults

Introduction

Welcome to the Older Adults session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session focuses on issues related to older adults and baby boomers (age sixty and older) with substance use disorders. With the growing use of alcohol and prescription medications among seniors, more older adults are in addiction treatment—a trend this session will address. This session defines low-risk use compared to severe substance use disorders. Understanding that alcohol use for older adults on medications can pose a grave danger, this session looks at moderate use of alcohol for older adults as defined by the National Institutes of Health. Dangerous use of alcohol combined with prescription medications is also examined. This session identifies how an older adult's substance use is affected by the losses in his or her life: loss of employment, loss of structure and regimens in retirement, loss of meaning in life based on work and self-esteem that depended on past relationships, loss of health and mobility, and loss of social activities, causing isolation. Even the loss of certain leisure activities can affect an older person's treatment and recovery. This session helps you as an older adult recover a new meaning and deeper spirituality to heal losses and create positive relationships.



SESSION 37 HAS TWO MAJOR PARTS:

1. Older Adults and Substance Use Disorders
2. Your Treatment and Recovery Goals

What is in this session?

This session has two major parts: (1) Older Adults and Substance Use Disorders and (2) Your Treatment and Recovery Goals.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
 - identify the most commonly used substance among older adults.
 - explain why illicit substance use among older adults has been increasing over time.
 - describe your adolescent and adult use of substances and how this past use affects you today.
 - describe your current use of substances, including prescription medications.
 - identify and manage your use of medication and what problems may have occurred as a result of your substance use.

- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
 - identify life issues and critical losses in your life that can affect your treatment and recovery.
 - identify how retirement and poor health may have worsened your substance use disorder and your self-esteem, finances, routines, and social relationships.
 - understand how your substance use disorder affected your meaning and purpose in life and how in recovery you may find new direction and joy.
 - identify how to find new recreational activities, improve your physical and psychological health, develop new relationships, and deepen your spiritual life.

What will be asked of you?

You will be asked to take a close look at your substance-related problems and how they have affected critical areas of your life, such as relationships with your grandchildren or even your own meaning in life. You will be asked to examine your use of alcohol and other substances, such as your prescription medications, and to better understand the grave risk to your life from combining

medications with at-risk drinking. You'll be asked to take an inventory of your medications and to identify the perils of consuming any alcohol. This will require honesty and courage. But the result of your efforts will aid you in understanding the role that your losses—whether the deaths of significant others or your own health issues—play in addiction. You will learn how to improve and create new healthy relationships, find a stronger self-esteem based on a deeper spirituality, and develop vital connections to your family, friends, and community. This can help you to improve your overall well-being and spiritual life.

Review the glossary

Before you get started, you may find it useful to review important words and their definitions in the glossary located at the end of this session:

Depression	Older adult drinking guideline
Medication misuse	Problem drinking
Older adult	Substance use disorder



Part 1: Older Adults and Substance Use Disorders

Among older adults (age sixty and older), the most common substance-related problems are alcohol-related problems. Indeed, alcohol-related problems are far more common than problems related to all other substance use disorders combined.

Although use of illicit (illegal) drugs is relatively uncommon among adults over age sixty-five, there has recently been an increase in the percentage of people age fifty and older abusing illicit drugs. As a result, more older adults are seeking treatment for substance use disorders. Much of this increase is the result of the aging of the baby boom generation (people born



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:

You will

- identify the most commonly used substance among older adults.
- explain why illicit substance use among older adults has been increasing over time.
- describe your adolescent and adult use of substances and how this past use affects you today.
- describe your current use of substances, including prescription medications.
- identify and manage your use of medication and what problems may have occurred as a result of your substance use.

between 1946 and 1964) into the fifty or older age group. This generation, particularly those born after 1950, had much higher rates of illicit drug use as teenagers and young adults than their older cohorts did.

People ages sixty-five and older compose only 13 percent of the population, yet account for more than one-third of total out-patient spending on prescription medications in the United States. Older adults are more likely to be prescribed long-term and multiple prescriptions, and some experience cognitive decline, which could lead to improper use of medications.



EXERCISE 1

Please answer the following questions:

1. Were you born during the baby boom generation (between 1946 and 1964)?

2. During your teenage and young adult life, which addictive substances did you use?

3. During your teenage and young adult life, how would you describe your substance use?

How Much Is Too Much?

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) recommends that adults older than sixty-five should not drink more than seven drinks in a week (one drink a day) and no more than three drinks on any one day. For older adults who take prescription medications, drinking alcohol can cause grave health problems and pose serious safety risks. Many medication labels have warnings against drinking any alcohol. Of course, any older adult diagnosed with a substance use disorder should abstain from drinking any alcohol or consuming any other addictive substance.

Older Adults and Patterns of Drinking or Other Drug Use

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is the primary guide used by health care professionals to diagnose substance use disorders. Its fifth edition, *DSM-5*, rates substance use disorders in terms of severity, from mild to severe.

According to the *DSM-5*, a substance use disorder is defined as a pattern of alcohol or other drug use in which an individual continues to use despite problems caused by that drug use.



EXERCISE 2

Please answer the following questions:

Problems that arise from substance use are defined by these eleven *DSM-5* criteria listed here.

1. Check the items that applied to you when you were using alcohol or other drugs.
 - Taking the substance in larger amounts or for longer periods than you meant
 - Wanting to cut down or stop using the substance but not managing to do so
 - Spending a lot of time getting, using, or recovering from use of the substance
 - Having cravings and urges to use the substance

- Not managing to do what you should at work, home, or school because of substance use
- Continuing to use, even when it causes problems in relationships
- Giving up important social, occupational, or recreational activities because of substance use
- Using substances again and again, even when it puts you in danger
- Continuing to use, even when you know you have a physical or psychological problem that could have been caused or made worse by the substance
- Needing more of the substance to get the effect you want (tolerance)
- Development of withdrawal symptoms when you stop using the substance, which can be relieved by taking more of the substance

The *DSM-5* says that agreement with four to five of these statements suggests that the individual meets the criteria for a moderate substance use disorder. Generally a higher level of problems related to substance use means a higher level of severity of the substance use disorder.

2. Do you feel that you meet the criteria for a diagnosis of at least a moderate substance use disorder?

Prescription Medication Misuse

Using any prescription or over-the-counter medication in a way that is different from how it was prescribed is considered medication misuse. This includes using too much or too little or not taking it on the schedule the doctor recommended. With over-the-counter drugs, such as cough syrup or aspirin, medication misuse can mean taking more than the package says or taking it too often.

Some medications don't mix well with alcohol or with other medications. For example, it is unsafe to drink alcohol when you are taking medications for sleeping, pain, anxiety, or depression. Because many medications remain in your body for many hours, even if you take a medication in the morning but have a drink with dinner, the alcohol-drug mix may cause problems. Over-the-counter medications or herbal drugs can also cause problems when taken with other medications or alcohol.



EXERCISE 3

Please answer the following questions:

1. Please list the medications that you take each day (including over-the-counter medications and herbal remedies).

Using any prescription or over-the-counter medication in a way that is different from how it was prescribed is considered medication misuse.

2. Have you asked your physician which of these drugs may interact with alcohol?

Medications and Aging

As people grow older, they are often prescribed more medication and different kinds of medication. Also, as people grow older, their bodies respond differently to alcohol and to medication than when they were younger. Certain prescribed medications do not mix well with other medications, including over-the-counter medications and herbal remedies.

Many medicines—prescription, over-the-counter, or herbal remedies—can be dangerous or even deadly when mixed with alcohol. If you take aspirin and drink, your risk of stomach or intestinal bleeding increases. When combined with alcohol, cold and allergy medicines can make you feel very sleepy. Alcohol used with large doses of acetaminophen, a common painkiller, may cause liver damage. Some medicines, such as cough syrups and laxatives, have high alcohol content. If you drink at the same time, your alcohol level will go up. Alcohol used with some sleeping pills, pain pills, anxiety medicine, or antidepressant medicine can be deadly.



EXERCISE 4

Please place a check mark if you experience any of the following situations:

- Memory trouble after having a drink or taking medicine
- Loss of coordination (walking unsteadily, frequent falls)
- Changes in sleeping habits
- Unexplained bruises
- Being unsure of yourself
- Irritability, sadness, depression
- Unexplained chronic pain
- Changes in eating habits
- Wanting to stay alone a lot of the time
- Failing to bathe or keep clean
- Having trouble finishing sentences
- Having trouble concentrating
- Difficulty staying in touch with family or friends
- Lack of interest in usual activities

Manage Your Medication

Over time, older adults may have several physicians, such as a primary care physician, a cardiologist, an internist, a dermatologist, a psychiatrist, and other specialists. They often act in isolation and treat the medical problem that they specialize in. They often prescribe medications that focus on their area of attention. For example, the cardiologist will prescribe medications specifically regarding your heart, not knowing what your primary care, dermatologist, or internist physicians are prescribing.



One physician should have a complete understanding of all the prescribed medications you are taking.

One physician should have a complete understanding of all the prescribed medications you are taking. Also, you should have a strong understanding about what medications you are taking, why you are taking them, and any problems with mixing these medications with other prescribed medications, over-the-counter medications, herbal remedies, or alcohol.

To do so, you should gather all of your current medications and bring them to your primary care physician so he or she can review them—and review them with you. This will allow your primary care physician to document in your chart what your medications are, the doses, and who prescribed them. Your primary care physician may ask permission to speak with your other physicians. That is a good sign that he or she wants to really understand your medical needs, so you should provide permission.

When you meet with your primary care physician and bring him or her all of your medications, ask the following questions so you can better understand the role of each medication and how to use it safely.

1. Why am I taking this medication?
2. What are the side effects of this medication?
3. Does this medication interact with any of my other medications?
4. Does this medication interact with alcohol or herbal remedies?



Part 2: Your Treatment and Recovery Goals

Deal with the Loss of Spouse or Loved One

As people get older, they are more likely to experience the loss of a spouse, partner, or other loved ones, such as family members or very close friends. During the initial grieving process, many people will feel numb, shocked, afraid, or angry. Losing a loved one can cause sadness, depression, and anxiety. It is common for people who are grieving to have problems sleeping, concentrating, and making decisions.

Alcohol addiction is more prevalent among older adults who have been separated or divorced or widowed. Some people drink heavily as a way to handle tough feelings and to deal with the loss of a loved one. After the loss of a spouse, many older adults both feel depressed and drink heavily. This can lead to suicidal feelings and behaviors.



EXERCISE 5

Please answer the following questions:

1. Did you experience the loss of a spouse or other loved one?



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- identify life issues and critical losses in your life that can affect your treatment and recovery.
- identify how retirement and poor health may have worsened your substance use disorder and your self-esteem, finances, routines, and social relationships.
- understand how your substance use disorder affected your meaning and purpose in life and how in recovery you may find new direction and joy.
- identify how to find new recreational activities, improve your physical and psychological health, develop new relationships, and deepen your spiritual life.

2. How does this loss affect you now?

3. In what ways has this loss affected your drinking or drug use?

4. Is the loss something that you want to address in your treatment and recovery?

Deal with Other Types of Loss

As people age, they are likely to lose other family members and friends through death and separation. Their children may move to other regions. Older adults may move from the home they lived in for many years.

Other types of loss include diminished mobility. As people age, they may lose the ability to drive and independently travel. Others may lose the ability to walk and get around freely and instead may have to use a wheelchair. Some older adults lose their ability to hear or see well. Some older adults lose the ability to cook and prepare their own meals.

Similarly, people can experience a wide variety of loss related to their drinking. They can lose their driver’s license after drinking while driving. Family members may not allow grandparents with drinking problems to be alone with their grandchildren because of fear that they may harm the children. People with drinking problems may lose the trust of their family and friends because of alcohol-related problems, arguments, and broken promises.

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EXERCISE 6

Please answer the following questions:

- 1. As you have gotten older, what type of personal losses have you experienced?

- 2. How do these losses affect you now?



3. In what ways have these losses affected your drinking or drug use?

4. Are these losses something that you want to address in your treatment and recovery?

Have a Successful Retirement

For many older people, retirement is the first major transition they will experience. Many people choose to retire and made financial and social plans for their retirement. Other people were forced to retire because of medical or other problems. Thus, the retirement experience can be related to the reasons for retiring, as well as to people’s perspectives about retirement.

Approximately one-third of retired adults have a hard time making the transition to retirement. For some, retirement means the loss of income and financial stability. Retirement may mean the loss of a job-related social support system of friends and coworkers. People in retirement may miss the structure of the working day, their social role at the workplace, and the sense of self-esteem associated with their accomplishments.

For some people, retirement means suddenly having a lot of free time. If they are not socially active, don't have meaningful hobbies, or don't enjoy being retired, people can become bored, lonely, and depressed. That can easily lead to problem drinking or other problems.



EXERCISE 7

Please answer the following questions:

1. Are you retired now or will you be retiring soon?

2. If you are retired, how does retirement affect you now?

3. If you are retired, in what ways does retirement affect your drinking alcohol or using other drugs?



During their lives, people often find meaning through their spiritual practices, religious practices, social activities, volunteering, and other helpful and healthy activities.

Find Meaning in Your Life

If you are like most people, you may have wondered about the meaning of life and the significance of your own life. You may have asked, “Why are we here?” “What is life about?” and “What is the purpose of my life?” During their lives, people often find meaning through their spiritual practices, religious practices, social activities, volunteering, and other helpful and healthy activities.

Using alcohol and other drugs can interfere with your search for meaning in life. For people with substance use disorders, intoxication can become a main purpose in life. However, the good news is that through recovery from a substance use disorder, your desire to seek a deeper meaning in life can return or may emerge for the first time.

For older adults, looking back at one’s life can also be an opportunity to find meaning and purpose in the life lived. And if one’s life included substance-related problems, looking back can be an opportunity to think about the reasons for having a substance use disorder and the decisions made earlier in life. These experiences can be important ways to find meaning in one’s past and to identify ways to improve one’s life in the future.



EXERCISE 8

Please answer the following questions:

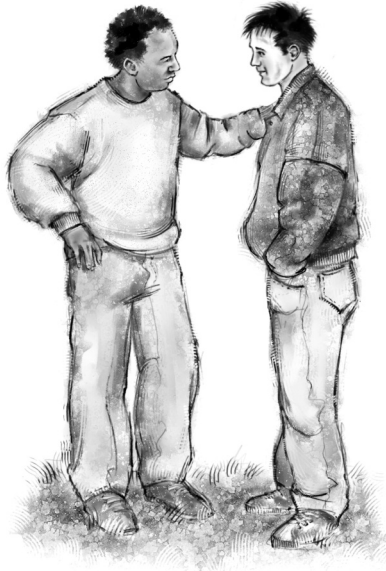
- 1. How have you sought answers regarding the meaning of your life?

2. In what ways has your substance use disorder affected your search for the meaning of your life?

3. Is this an issue that you would like to address in your treatment and recovery?

Develop Healthy Relationships

As people age, there is the possibility of increasing isolation. The death of a spouse, family members, and friends can reduce existing social networks. When older adults experience reduced independence, such as the ability to drive, their social network may shrink and they may resent having to ask or depend on another person. Some older adults had rich social lives when younger, but because of disability, relocation, or other issues, their social lives are less fulfilling.



Luckily, treatment and recovery are great opportunities to build or rebuild relationships that are healthy and supportive of your recovery.

Substance-related problems can also harm social relations. Your substance use disorder may have harmed your relationships with your spouse, children, other relatives, friends, and coworkers. Your substance use disorder may have pushed your loved ones and friends away from you. You and the people in your life may feel anger, shame, distrust, resentment, and other unhealthy feelings. Some people in your life may be pleased that you are going to treatment but may still be unsure about how your recovery will unfold. Some people may not support your recovery, because it may shine a light on their own problems.

If your substance use disorder has harmed your relationships, you cannot repair them by yourself. Luckily, treatment and recovery are great opportunities to build or rebuild relationships that are healthy and supportive of your recovery.

During treatment, you can learn about how your substance use disorder affects your thinking, behavior, feelings, and relationships. You can learn how to understand and deal with your feelings. You can learn healthy communication skills and how to tell others what you feel and need. During recovery, you can learn how to recognize the harm you have done to others and how to make amends to them. Overall, you can learn steps that can help other people build trust in you.



EXERCISE 9

Please answer the following questions:

1. In what ways has growing older harmed your relationships with others?

2. How has your substance use disorder harmed your relationships with others?

3. Is this an issue that you would like to address in your treatment and recovery?

Improve Your Physical Health

As people age, they experience a greater likelihood of chronic diseases. Older adults are more likely to develop arthritis, a disease that affects their joints and supportive tissues, causing pain, swelling, stiffness, and limited motion. Similarly, older adults are more likely to experience various types of heart diseases that can require surgery and a serious change of lifestyle and diet. Similarly, older adults with poor lifestyle and diet may experience

diabetes, which can cause additional medical problems. Older adults are more likely to experience such problems as cataracts, dementia, glaucoma, sleep problems, and urinary incontinence.

Alcohol use among older adults can cause or worsen serious medical problems, such as increasing risk for high blood pressure, heart problems, stroke, impaired immune system, liver disease, and gastrointestinal bleeding. Alcohol use among older adults can cause or increase the likelihood of serious injury related to falling, resulting in broken bones and hips.

Luckily, treatment and recovery are great opportunities for you to improve your physical health. Like many older adults, you may have ignored or put off important opportunities for medical, dental, and vision examinations. During treatment, you can ask for and receive comprehensive health examinations to get a snapshot of your overall health and to identify medical issues that need attention. Similarly, a physician can review the medications that you currently take, run tests, and make recommendations. During treatment, you will learn many ways to improve your lifestyle, diet, and overall health.



EXERCISE 10

Please answer the following questions:

1. In what ways has getting older affected your physical health?

2. How has your substance use disorder affected your physical health?

3. Are these issues that you would like to address in your treatment and recovery?

Improve Your Psychological Health

Surveys of older adults note that they are more likely to experience memory loss, sadness or depression, loneliness, and feelings that they are a burden to others. About 20 percent of older adults experience some type of mental health problem, most commonly anxiety, cognitive impairment, and depression. Depression is the most common mental health problem among older adults. It causes distress and suffering, and it can lead to impairment in physical, mental, and social functioning. Importantly, risk factors for late-onset depression include loss of a spouse or partner, physical illness, impaired functional status, and heavy alcohol

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consumption. Luckily, depression is one of the most successfully treated illnesses.

Substance use disorders among older adults can cause and worsen problems regarding thinking and memory, confusion, sleep, anxiety, depression, and dementia. Luckily, treatment and recovery are great ways to address and improve your psychological health. During treatment, you will have opportunities to meet with medical professionals who can conduct screenings and evaluations regarding your psychological health. Screenings and evaluations generally consist of questionnaires about how you are feeling and thinking. They can help determine whether you have certain problems, such as depression, and help the health care professionals to recommend treatment when required.



EXERCISE 11

Please answer the following questions:

1. In what ways has getting older affected your psychological health?

2. How has your substance use disorder affected your psychological health?

- 3. Has someone else, such as a family member, suggested that you have memory problems, confusion, or sadness that you don't recognize yourself?

- 4. Are these issues that you would like to address in your treatment and recovery?

Improve Your Recreational and Leisure Life

When they retire, older adults often have a lot more free time than they did before retirement. Retirement is an opportunity to develop or continue healthy recreational and leisure activities. What is leisure? *Leisure* is a period of free time during which people are free from obligations, work, chores, or activities required for living. Basically, it is the use of free time for enjoyment, rest, and relaxation. Many leisure activities are passive, such as watching TV, going to movies, or taking walks. Somewhat in contrast, *recreation* is an activity that people engage in during their free time. Recreational activities include sports, music, games, travel, reading, arts and crafts, and dance.

Research has shown that both leisure and recreational activities can significantly improve physical, social, and psychological well-being. Although older adults may experience barriers to

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leisure and recreational activities, such as transportation, these barriers are frequently overcome through senior centers, peer support agencies, and local governments.

Get going! Developing or returning to a rich leisure and recreational life can greatly improve your overall well-being. Such activities can dramatically improve your recovery. They can be part of your recovery.



EXERCISE 12

Please answer the following questions:

1. From the following suggestions, check the recreational and leisure activities that you enjoyed in the past or might enjoy now.
 - Take regular walks
 - Take regular walks with friends
 - Visit local library
 - Participate in library-sponsored activities (book clubs, speaker events, social events)
 - Visit senior center
 - Participate in senior center-sponsored activities (lunch, classes, social events, trips)
 - Take classes at local college or university (often free or low cost to seniors)
 - Develop a new hobby: join a hobby club
 - Volunteer in your community (Senior Corps, Oasis, AARP, county programs)
 - Join retiree associations associated with your profession
 - Join a hobby group—from knitting to model trains
 - Become a docent or guide at your local museum
 - Become a stamp or coin collector, join a stamp or coin collector group
 - Travel, join a travel group for seniors

- 2. Describe barriers, if any, that you might have to participating in these activities. How could you overcome these barriers?

- 3. Identify steps you can take now to start participating in these leisure and recreational activities (get the phone number, make a call, visit website, review options).

Improve Your Spiritual Life

Many older adults with substance use disorders enjoyed a rich spiritual and religious life during their earlier years. Over time, they may have lost interest in the social aspects of their religious life. For some older adults, isolation, loneliness, and depression can reduce their interest in spiritual issues. They may focus on themselves and feel unable to focus on something greater than themselves.

Older adults with a substance use disorder may have shifted their focus to drinking alcohol, using other drugs, and becoming intoxicated. With this change in focus, they may have lost interest in seeking a spiritual connection with their Higher Power.

**There are many paths
to a more spiritual
life—meditation, prayer,
religious participation,
and service to others.**

Luckily, addiction treatment and recovery are great opportunities to develop or redevelop a spiritual life. In fact, spiritual growth is central to addiction treatment and recovery. There are many paths to a more spiritual life—meditation, prayer, religious participation, and service to others. For most people in recovery, the Twelve Step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, are the most common and powerful ways to grow spiritually. Today you can find many AA meetings that older adults attend. If not, ask to have a meeting started at your center.



EXERCISE 13

Please answer the following questions:

1. In what ways has getting older affected your spiritual life?

2. How has your substance use disorder affected your spiritual life?

3. Do you wish to improve or reexperience your spiritual life?

4. Are these issues that you would like to address in your treatment and recovery?

Take Action!

In this session, you have reviewed important ways in which you can improve your life, including improving your life through treatment and recovery. You have explored ways to find meaning in your life, develop healthy relationships, improve your physical health, improve your psychological health, and improve your spiritual life.



EXERCISE 14

Using the following list, place a check mark by items that you would like to do. For each one checked, use the blank lines to write down specific examples about how you can take action.

- Actively participate in individual and group counseling sessions

- Join and actively participate in a Twelve Step group

- Meet new people

- Join or rejoin a religious organization

- Begin or revisit healthy hobbies

- Participate in healthy recreational activities

- Identify and participate in healthy leisure activities

- Volunteer at a local charity or other organization

- Get comprehensive medical and dental exams

- Take courses or therapy sessions on improving your social life



Session 37 Summary

In this session you have learned to identify age parameters for being an older adult or baby boomer and how belonging to this generation may have affected your current use of substances, especially if you used addictive substances in your adolescence and young adulthood. You have learned what medication misuse is and how dangerous it is to combine prescriptions with alcohol. You reviewed categories of misuse of alcohol and applied them to yourself. In addition, you examined the many life issues among older adults that may affect your substance use disorder. Finally, you learned that many of these issues—such as retirement, disability, loss of hearing or vision, loss of significant others and loneliness, loss of social relationships and employment routines, and isolation—can be healed in recovery to improve your overall well-being and health.



Session 37 Glossary

Depression is the most common mental health problem among older adults. It causes distress and suffering, and it can lead to impairment in physical, mental, and social functioning. Risk factors for late-onset depression include death of a spouse or partner, physical illness, impaired functional status, and heavy alcohol consumption. Depression is one of the most successfully treated illnesses.

Medication misuse is using any prescription or over-the-counter medication in a way that is different from how it was prescribed. This includes using too much or too little or not taking it on the schedule the doctor recommended. Consuming alcohol with many medications can be deadly.

Older adult is generally defined as a person age sixty or older.

The **older adult drinking guideline** suggests that adults older than sixty-five consume no more than seven drinks in a week and no more than three drinks on any one day. Drinking more than one drink a day for seniors can lead to serious health and safety problems. Any older adult diagnosed with a substance use disorder should not drink any alcohol or take any other addictive substance.

Problem drinking results when alcohol use causes medical, psychological, or social consequences. Most problem drinkers consume more than the recommended low-risk limits. However, some older adults who drink smaller amounts can also experience alcohol-related problems.

Substance use disorder is a pattern of alcohol or other drug use in which an individual continues to use despite problems caused by that drug use. Substance use disorders are ranked from mild to severe, depending on the number of symptoms identified for a person. Severe disorders may also be referred to as *addiction*. The addictive substance can range from alcohol to heroin, including prescription medication. Among older adults on medication, any consumption of alcohol can pose a grave risk to the person's life.