

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG USE AMONGST OLDER AUSTRALIANS INFORMATION FOR GPs

- There is an increasing number of older Australians drinking alcohol at high levels and some are using illicit drugs as well.
- It's not necessarily an issue that's front of mind in this group in general practice.
- The risks are significant and you their GP is best placed to detect any problems and start a process of engagement and harm minimisation.
- Always ask about consumption and of course do it in a way which is non-judgemental and asks how much rather than whether they do at all.
- Consider the reasons why older people drink - no matter what our age, alcohol is regularly consumed at celebrations, social events with friends, for relaxation, for fun, and to deal with grief, but there may be other reasons for older people to drink alcohol excessively - such as illness and pain, stress, boredom, loneliness, to replace meals, or to forget problems.
- If one of your patients actually presents to you wishing to discuss alcohol or drug use this may signal that they have increased their use and want help.
- Consider whether your patient has chronic pain or mental health issues - There is a strong association with daily drinking and depression or chronic pain; and binge drinking with anxiety.
- Older people with a history of illicit drug use are likely to be biologically older than their chronological age and have a range of chronic co-occurring illnesses, such as hepatitis C.

- Shame and embarrassment are significant barriers to older Australians initiating conversations about alcohol use with their GP and many older people with a history of illicit drug use delay seeking medical care or avoid health services because of stigma and previous negative experiences.
- Many patients believe because medications are prescribed by a GP, they are automatically safe irrespective of when and how they are used.
- Evidence from overseas indicates that older people do as well, if not better than younger people in alcohol-related treatment.
- Research conducted in the U.S. and Australia indicates that older drinkers would reduce their consumption of alcohol if they believed this would be beneficial for their health and if their doctor advised them to do so.
- The growing population of older Australians and their current levels of alcohol and illicit drug use represent a significant public health issue, with projections to greatly increase in coming years. You as a GP play a vital role in detecting problems and ensuring relevant information about alcohol and other drugs is relayed effectively to patients.
- Sometimes moderation is not possible, and abstinence is the only option for drug use. Routine investigations such as liver function tests can assist with motivation to change.
- Keep in mind that although the NHMRC advice is that you should drink no more than two standard drinks on any day there have been some concerns raised in the literature that these recommendations may

not be appropriate for older people because of the physiological changes that can occur with ageing and the high probability that older patients may be on contraindicated medications.

- People presenting with problems related to alcohol use such as injuries falls, high blood pressure, obesity should lead to an enquiry about alcohol consumption and you'll need to check of course that they know what a standard drink is.
- Every Australian over the age of 50 should be screened for alcohol and illicit drug use as part of any regular check-ups.

Dr Norman Swan

Executive Director

Tonic Health Media's Executive Director and co-founder, Dr Norman Swan, is Australia's most respected health journalist and broadcaster, with an international broadcast career spanning more than 30 years.

Norman hosts The Health Report on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Radio National which is the world's longest running health program in the English-speaking world. Norman is also guest reporter on Four Corners; appears regularly on The Drum and occasional host of Radio National Breakfast. He has won many awards for his work including Australia's top prize for journalism, the Gold Walkley. Norman also edits his own newsletter, The Choice Health Reader, which is published in partnership with CHOICE, Australia's leading consumer advocacy organisation.

Current Boards: Executive Director, Tonic Health Media, The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), and the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

Source

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