



DEPT. OF DISABILITIES, AGING & INDEPENDENT LIVING
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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Vermont Works to Reduce Risky Drinking Behaviors Among Older Vermonters

BURLINGTON – Nearly one in four Vermonters age 65 and older engage in risky alcohol use – a level significantly higher than the national average of 19 percent, and Vermont health officials are working to reach out to this often-overlooked population of people who drink.

“Alcohol affects the body differently as we get older,” said Health Commissioner Mark Levine, MD. “Aging lowers the body’s tolerance for alcohol. Which means the amount of alcohol you used to be able to handle is no longer the norm.”

To help raise awareness, the Health Department has launched a new web page and resources for older Vermonters, their families and caregivers:
healthvermont.gov/olderadultsubstanceuse.

Together with the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL), the Health Department is also engaging health care providers and statewide organizations that work directly with these Vermonters – including AARP Vermont, the Visiting Nurses Association, Area Agencies on Aging and SASH (Support and Services at Home) – to share resources and speak with their clients about the issues alcohol consumption poses with aging.

Data from the Health Department’s 2016 [Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System](#) shows that 23 percent of older Vermonters engaged in risky levels of alcohol consumption. Risky drinking among older adults is defined as three or more of any type of alcoholic drinks on one occasion in the past month for men, two for women. Older adults with higher incomes and education

were more likely to engage in risky drinking compared to those with lower incomes and education.

According to Dr. Levine, while the number of drinks may not sound like a lot, older drinkers are more susceptible to health risks of alcohol use due to the physiological changes associated with aging. "As we age, changes in the body, such as less-efficient metabolism, lower water content and increased brain sensitivity, may cause alcohol and drugs to have a stronger effect," said Dr. Levine. "Older adults generally become intoxicated and impaired with fewer drinks, putting them at higher risks for falls and other injuries and health problems. For older adults with dementia or those taking medications that interact with alcohol, there is no safe level, and even one drink can be dangerous."

"Older Vermonters make incredibly valuable contributions to our state, and it is crucial that we acknowledge the unique health concerns this population faces," said DAIL Commissioner Monica Caserta Hutt. "We are grateful to our partners at Health and in the provider community for focusing on the issue of raising awareness about risky drinking."

Charles Gurney is the substance abuse and aging coordinator with the departments of Health and DAIL. "It's important for people with health problems, or who take certain medications, to consider drinking less or not at all," Gurney said. "Certain health problems are more common in older adults, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and cancer. Drinking too much can make these problems worse." Gurney also cautions people on medications to be thoughtful about how much they drink, warning that alcohol may intensify or interfere with the effects of prescription and over the counter drugs.

Gurney said older adults are surrounded by socially acceptable drinking, but that even a simple conversation can make a difference in understanding their new levels of tolerance. "It's truly an awareness issue," said Gurney. "Older Vermonters are dealing with many significant life changes. For some, free time to socialize and drink with friends presents more opportunities for risky drinking. For others, dealing with chronic health problems, reduced mobility, and the loss of loved ones and friends can lead to greater isolation and depression, and increases in alcohol consumption."

The rate of risky alcohol use among older Vermonters is a serious concern," agreed Greg Marchildon, AARP Vermont State Director. "Nationally, we've seen a doubling of alcohol use disorders among seniors. For too many people, risky drinking habits impact their ability to live independent and healthy lives. Reaching out to Vermonters and their families with sound data, support from their providers and accessible resources is a critical first step to addressing this public health issue, and AARP Vermont welcomes this opportunity to help."

"This is a population that faces an incredible lack of age-appropriate treatment opportunities," said Gurney. "Nationally, specific programs for older people have very good outcomes." Noting that Rutland is currently the only location in Vermont that offers an addiction treatment program focused on older adults, Gurney said that for this population in particular, medical

settings are the most effective places for providing intervention and treatment. “Older adults tend to receive information well from their health care providers and become better engaged in managing their own health.”

Get the facts about drinking levels, get screened, and don't mix. For more information about alcohol and older adults, visit healthvermont.gov/olderadultsubstanceuse .

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