

ALCOHOL AND THE OLDER ADULT BRAIN

When your children are raised and you've retired from work, you may suddenly have a lot more time on your hands. For some, these changes can be a positive and welcomed part of life and for others present new, unforeseen challenges such as loneliness, poor health or loss of loved ones.

It can be tempting to start going to the pub more frequently or to open a bottle of wine more regularly in retirement. You might think that binge drinking is only problem that affects young ones!

What the scientific research is telling us though is that older people are drinking far more than they did in the past.

While adults at any age can be affected negatively by alcohol, older adults appear to be even more vulnerable. Why? The answer to this question lies in the differences in our bodies and brains as we get older.

As we age, the body's ability to process and clear alcohol effectively from the body changes. For example, there is a reduction in our muscle mass as we get older, as well as a reduction in the total amount of water stored in the body. This means that alcohol becomes more concentrated in our system. Over time, the same amount of alcohol can pack a far more powerful punch.

As we age, we are also more likely to experience physical health problems, be taking medication or be at greater risk for other disorders of the brain e.g. dementia. Because of this, older people tolerate alcohol less well than their younger counterparts. They are more sensitive to the negative effects of alcohol, meaning that they may experience more harms from alcohol use than other adults. We are at increased risk of falling as a result of drinking as we age, and are more likely to seriously injure ourselves if we do fall.

Many experts believe that low-risk drinking levels should become lower as we age. We do need to be extra vigilant about our alcohol use and how it affects us as we age.

You may have heard as well that alcohol consumption can have medicinal properties or even protective of your brain as you get older. However, the role of alcohol in late-life disorders of the brain is very complicated. The results of scientific studies have been mixed as to whether alcohol guards against brain decline in later life or whether it accelerates this process. More studies are needed before definite conclusions can be drawn.