

## Alcohol and Medication Issues Among Older Adults

As a home care aide, you help keep your clients healthy. You are the eyes and ears of the home care team and may be the first to notice if a client has a health problem. Some older clients may have problems with medications or alcohol. You can help by sharing your concerns about these and other health problems with your supervisor. You can make the difference.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

#### SIGNS OF A PROBLEM

Some signs of a medication or alcohol problem, which may also be signs of other health conditions, include:

- ▲ Missing pills, confusion about medications
- ▲ Empty alcohol containers or a large supply of alcohol
- ▲ Drinking more than recommended by one's health care providers
- ▲ Blackouts, problems with memory, speech, or vision
- ▲ Getting hurt, including falls
- ▲ Sleep problems
- ▲ Feeling depressed, anxious, confused, or moody
- ▲ Not caring for oneself
- ▲ Being mean to loved ones/caregivers
- ▲ Spending a lot of time alone
- ▲ Other signs like weight loss, upset stomach, or shaking

If a client shows these signs or other major changes all of a sudden, speak with your supervisor. You can help your clients get the support they may need for any of their health problems.

#### MEDICATIONS

- ▲ Older adults can feel the effects of medications more than younger adults do.
- ▲ Some prescription drugs, over-the-counter drugs, and supplements, like vitamins and herbs, can interact with one another.
- ▲ Some older adults take their medications in the wrong way, which can be harmful. They may take too many, too few, or forget to take them at all.

#### ALCOHOL

- ▲ Older adults can feel the effects of alcohol more than younger adults do.
- ▲ Alcohol can interact with some prescription and over-the-counter drugs and supplements.
- ▲ Alcohol can cause health problems, falls, and sleeping troubles in older adults. It can also make their health problems worse.
- ▲ Many older adults should never drink alcohol. Some older adults can drink a little sometimes. Older adults should talk to their health care providers to learn if alcohol is safe for them.

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## WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

### KNOW THE SIGNS

To help your clients, it is important for you to know the signs of a possible medication or alcohol problem.

- ▲ Learn the signs listed on the front of this sheet.
- ▲ Watch for changes in how your clients look, feel, and act.
- ▲ Do not try to **diagnose** a problem. Your very important role is to observe and report to your supervisor.

### REPORT THE PROBLEM

Tell your supervisor if you see **any signs** of a problem or changes in your clients that concern you. It is your job to report anything that may harm your clients, even if they ask you not to. Sharing what you see or hear with your supervisor may help your clients get the support they need.

- ▲ Report anything that might put you or your client in immediate danger, like falls, as soon as you can. Report less dangerous situations once you have left the client's home.
- ▲ When you contact your supervisor, you will talk about:
  - What you have noticed and what concerns you
  - Confidentiality issues
  - Safety issues for your client and you (including whether you feel unsafe at work or about reporting your client's problem)
  - Next steps (follow-up to your discussion)
- ▲ You are required to keep information about your clients confidential and should not talk with anyone but your supervisor about your concerns.

### YOU MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

It has been shown that many older adults who get help for their problems can improve their health and quality of life. You can assist your clients to get this help. You can make all the difference.

### RESOURCES

To learn more about alcohol, medications, and older adults, you can contact:

Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information & Education Helpline  
800/327-5050  
[www.helpline-online.com](http://www.helpline-online.com)

Bureau of Substance Abuse Services  
Massachusetts Department of Public Health  
[www.state.ma.us/dph/bsas/bsas.htm](http://www.state.ma.us/dph/bsas/bsas.htm)

Massachusetts Health Promotion Clearinghouse • 800/952-6637  
[www.maclclearinghouse.com](http://www.maclclearinghouse.com)

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol & Drug Information • 800/729-6686  
[www.health.org](http://www.health.org)

Massachusetts Council for Home Care Aide Services, Inc.  
617/224-4141

Your own supervisor at your home care agency