

To Your Health Newsletter

“Promoting Good Health Through Information”

Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System

Veteran Health Education Newsletter • Spring 2010

The ABC's of Alcohol Use

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Special Recognition to Nelson Spaulding, Addiction Treatment Services*

Drinking alcoholic beverages is a common activity for many adults. Because of this, people often forget that alcohol is a drug. Like any chemical substance, alcohol can have serious effects on your mind and your body. Therefore it is important for anyone consuming alcohol to be aware of the potential risks and consequences associated with drinking. Is there a way you can you drink safely and still enjoy yourself?

What constitutes one alcoholic beverage?

One alcoholic beverage =

- one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler; OR
- one 5-ounce glass of wine; OR
- 1.5 ounces of 80 proof distilled spirits (including liquors such as vodka, rum, or gin) in a shot of a mixed drink.

How much is too much?

Most men can safely have up to two drinks a day. Most women can safely have one drink a day. However, there are many people who should not drink alcoholic beverages, including:

- Pregnant women, women who are trying to get pregnant, or women who are nursing
- People who plan to drive or engage in other activities that require alertness and skill
- People taking certain over-the-counter or prescription medications
- People with medical conditions that can be made worse by drinking
- Recovering alcoholics

Alcohol-Medication Interactions

Mixing alcohol and medications can be harmful and can put you at risk for dangerous reactions. These include nausea and vomiting, headaches, drowsiness, fainting or loss of coordination, internal bleeding, heart problems, or difficulty breathing. Drinking alcohol while taking medications can make medications less effective. It can also intensify side effects of certain medications, such as lightheadedness, sleepiness, or drowsiness. The combination of alcohol and medications cause poor concentration and difficulty performing mechanical skills, including driving. Speaking to your pharmacist or other health care provider can help you decide which medications may interact harmfully with alcohol. You may be surprised which medications can interact with alcohol, including prescription medications, many over-the-counter medications, and even some herbal remedies.

How Alcohol Affects your Health

While some research has suggested that small to moderate amounts of alcohol daily may decrease the risk of heart disease, drinking in large quantities can be harmful. Alcohol use, even in small amounts, may lead to stroke, motor vehicle accidents, harmful medication interactions, cancer, birth defects, and lead to heavier drinking.

Alcohol Use in the Senior Population

Alcohol abuse among the senior population is a growing concern. Metabolism decreases with age, therefore a senior's digestive system breaks down alcohol at a slower rate than in a younger person. This means that if a senior and a middle-aged person are the same weight and both have the same amount of alcohol, the senior will experience more severe and longer-lasting effects.

Is My Drinking A Problem?

Drinking is considered a clinical disorder (called Alcohol Abuse or Dependence) when the drinking leads to some of the following:

- Missing work or school, or performing poorly at work or school
- Failing to fulfill important obligations, such as missing meetings and appointments, neglecting household duties or childcare, or forgetting to pay bills
- Drinking in dangerous situations, such as operating heavy machinery or driving
- Continued alcohol use despite drinking-related problems, such as arguments with a spouse, physical or medical problems, or legal problems, such as disorderly conduct, public drunkenness, or getting in fights
- Drinking more than intended or for a longer time-period than intended
- Trying to cut down or quit drinking but not being able to
- Spending a lot of time drinking or being hung-over

Tolerance or withdrawal symptoms

People can develop a tolerance to alcohol. They may drink the same amount as before but have decreased effects or require more alcohol to become intoxicated. Though someone may build up a tolerance and not feel drunk, the alcohol still has the same influence on the body. Some people may not feel drunk and think it is fine to drive, however their blood alcohol is over the legal limit. Getting a DUI in California is costly in terms of time and money and can result in having your driver's license revoked or suspended, jail time, court costs and referral to a "DUI School." Rather than drink and drive, use a "designated driver," a cab or public transportation.

Resources Available

If you think you have a drinking problem there are several resources that may be able to help. These include:

- **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)**
See www.alcoholics-anonymous.org for more information and times and locations of meetings in your area.
- **Al-Anon/Alateen**
For loved ones and families of those with an alcohol problem. See <http://www.al-anon.alateen.org>
- **Addiction Treatment Services (ATS)**
Call (650) 617-2734 for consultation. There are multiple substance abuse treatment programs at VAPAHCS. These include several outpatient and residential programs organized under ATS.

Recipe for Health

JAMAICAN JERK CHICKEN

The spices and peppers in this dish will transport you to a whole new taste.

Ingredients:

1/2 tsp cinnamon, ground
1 1/2 tsp allspice, ground
1 1/2 tsp black pepper, ground
1 Tbsp hot pepper, chopped
1 tsp hot pepper, crushed, dried
2 tsp oregano, crushed
2 tsp thyme, crushed
1/2 tsp salt
6 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 cup onion, pureed or finely chopped
1/4 cup vinegar
3 Tbsp brown sugar
8 pieces chicken, skinless
(4 breasts, drumsticks)

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350 °F.
2. Combine all ingredients except chicken in large bowl. Rub seasoning over chicken and marinate in refrigerator for 6 hours or longer.
3. Evenly space chicken on nonstick or lightly greased baking pan.
4. Cover with aluminum foil and bake for 40 minutes. Remove foil and continue baking for an added 30–40 minutes or until the meat can be easily pulled away from the bone with a fork.

Health Information:

Yield: 6 servings

Serving size: 1/2 breast or 2 small drumsticks

Each serving provides:

Calories: 199

Total fat: 4 g

Saturated fat: 1 g

Cholesterol: 81 mg

Sodium: 267 mg

Total fiber: 1 g

Protein: 28 g

Carbohydrates: 12 g

Potassium: 338 mg

www.nhlbi.nih.gov

Restless Legs Syndrome

By Amy Quien, MSN, RNP

Have you ever experienced a creepy, crawly feeling in your legs accompanied by an overwhelming urge to move them? If you have, chances are you could have Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS). Other descriptions used to explain the unpleasant sensation that goes along with RLS include shooting pains, like an electric shock, sensation of pins and needles, burning, numbness and tugging. RLS is a neurological disorder that affects about 10% of the population, but is often under or misdiagnosed. Because RLS tends to be more obvious at night when you are in bed, it can interrupt your sleep.

There are no specific tests to prove whether or not you have RLS. However, people who have RLS usually report the following: a strong urge to move their legs; resting or being still brings on RLS; the uncomfortable sensation gets better with moving around and symptoms are worse at night when lying down in bed.

The cause of RLS is not known. However, it can run in families. It can also appear as a result of an illness or health condition. RLS has been associated with pregnancy, low levels of iron, kidney disease and peripheral neuropathy (nerve damage in the hands and feet).

There is no cure for RLS, but there are medications available to help with calming the symptoms. If you think you might have RLS, you should contact your healthcare provider to discuss your condition and see which treatment option is best for you. In the meantime, you can do some things to help you feel better. For example, get a test to find out if you have iron deficiency and use supplements as needed, make sure you eat a balanced and healthy diet, maintain good sleeping habits, eliminate alcohol and caffeine, and include activities in your daily routine such as walking and stretching.

Veteran and Family Advisory Council

Linda Frommer, MPH, Health Systems Specialist;

Colleen Higgins, MEd, Designated Learning Office; Elizabeth Richards, JD, Presidential Management Fellow

A key priority for the VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VAPAHCS) is to improve patient satisfaction with all aspects of care. To support this effort, we are delighted to announce the formation of a new Veteran and Family Advisory Council (VFAC).

The VFAC is comprised of six diverse patients and family members with varied backgrounds and experiences. The members were chosen after a screening and interviewing process. Each went through an in-depth, half-day orientation.

The mission of the VFAC is to support the VA vision to be “a patient-centered integrated health care organization for patients providing excellent health care ...” The VFAC will provide an ongoing forum for veterans and their families, bringing their perspectives, preferences, needs and values into delivery of care, policy creation, and quality improvement efforts. The information and ideas from this council will be extraordinarily valuable to VAPAHCS. It is an exciting opportunity for VAPAHCS staff to work in partnership with patients and family members towards our goal of becoming a more patient and family centered organization.

The council’s first monthly meeting was held in January, and guests included VAPAHCS leadership and clinical staff. The council members were introduced to such topics as New Patient Orientation and provided constructive feedback to staff regarding patient orientation materials. Through the VFAC and such meetings, VAPAHCS can routinely receive direct feedback from veterans and their family members. Our aim is to strengthen our culture of patient and family centered care.

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7777 Freedom Drive
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World Wide Web Address:

www.palo-alto.med.va.gov

Taking an active role in your care can help prevent medication errors! Carry your medication list with you at all times!

Tips for Healthy Living

- Refrigerate prepared soups before you eat them. As the soup cools, the fat will rise to the top. Skim it off the surface for reduced fat content.
- Keep a pair of comfortable walking or running shoes in your car and office.

www.smallstep.gov

Questions or Comments?

If you have any questions or topics you would like addressed in *To Your Health* feel free to contact:

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To Your Health is published quarterly for VAPAHCS veterans and their families.

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