Many older Australians (65 years and older) drink alcohol every day. It’s true that most drink less at any one time than younger people and they sensibly often stop or reduce drinking when unwell.

This fact sheet provides some important information to assist older Australians to maintain a healthy lifestyle in retirement.

**The risks**

Your ability to ‘tolerate’ alcohol decreases as you get older because:

- your ratio of body water to body fat decreases, so there is less body water in which to dilute the alcohol. Hence, an older person who drinks the same amount as a younger person will have a higher blood alcohol concentration.
- blood flow to your liver is decreased, and your liver enzymes that break down alcohol are slower. Hence, alcohol stays in your liver longer before it is moved into the general blood stream or broken down, which increases the risk of damage to your liver.
- your mental and physical functions also decrease including coordination, vision, hearing and reaction time. This means you have a higher risk of accidents after drinking, such as falls and car crashes.

**Medication**

Alcohol can also interact with over-the-counter and prescription medicines that you may be taking. The effects of alcohol on the brain are increased by medicines that slow down the brain such as sleeping pills, anti-histamines, anti-depressants, anti-anxiety drugs, and some painkillers.

Alcohol and medicines such as antibiotics, anti-blood clotting, anti-high blood pressure and anti-diabetic drugs may also be broken down in the liver by the same enzymes. This may lead to unwanted side effects from either the alcohol or the medicine.

**Potential benefits for some**

If you are a healthy person over the age of 65 who drinks a light to moderate amount of alcohol, you usually have a lower risk of developing:

- diseases and disorders of the heart and the blood vessels (arteries and veins), which includes:
  - atherosclerosis (hardening and rigidity of the artery wall)
  - high blood pressure
  - heart attacks
  - heart failure and
  - strokes, either from blockages or ruptures of brain blood vessels.
- dementias, and your ability to perceive, reason, remember and think is improved.
- depression.
- bone loss.

However, if you continuously drink heavy or excessive amounts of alcohol, your risk of developing these diseases and disorders is increased.