

April 14, 2025 Weekly Clinical Update

In this month's Center of Excellence for Behavioral Health in Nursing Facilities (COE-NF) Newsletter, much of the education provided centered around the fact that April is "Alcohol Awareness Month". So what could that have to do with nursing homes anyway? They point out that this is a good time to "raise awareness and understanding of alcohol use and misuse", which is a primary focus related to Substance Use Disorder, in the pending revisions to Appendix PP which are currently scheduled for April 28th (THIS MONTH). Advice may be prepare for the changes, but please don't hold your breath in case they extend the date again then perhaps make some revisions to the revisions.

But, we don't provide care to meet regulations, we provide care to provide our residents the highest quality of care and quality of life. Many facilities have a planned Life Enrichment program of "Happy Hour", which is perfectly acceptable. And many residents have physician orders for a glass of wine before bedtime because that was part of their previous lifestyle.

The statistics from the National Institute of Health are a bit alarming. "Alcohol consumption among older adults in the U.S. has been increasing over the years. According to recent data, approximately **56.9% of people aged 65 and older** reported drinking alcohol in the past year, and **43.7%** consumed alcohol in the past month. Alarmingly, **12% of older adults** engaged in binge drinking, and **3.3%** reported heavy alcohol use in the previous month.

This trend is partly attributed to the aging Baby Boomer generation, whose drinking habits have persisted into later life. Between 2002 and 2019, the percentage of monthly drinkers in this age group increased by **16%**, while the actual number of drinkers grew by **80%** due to the size of this cohort.

Alcohol misuse in older adults poses unique risks, including heightened vulnerability to health complications, interactions with medications, and cognitive decline. Public health initiatives are increasingly focusing on raising awareness and providing support for this demographic."

The honest truth is, facilities may not have been given all the information about the residents' prior routines at the time of admission to the facility. Experience would teach that more and more elders have a history of alcohol use and more and more have alcohol abuse, which may be hidden or not revealed. Anyone who has cared for a resident with alcohol-related dementia understands that those residents have a very challenging condition. Alcohol-related dementia, also known as alcohol-induced major neurocognitive disorder, is considered to be a "severe" form of brain damage that affects cognitive

abilities, memory, and daily functioning. This dementia is caused by structural and functional damage to the brain as the brain shrinks the frontal lobe (responsible for decision-making, problem solving and emotional regulation). It also depletes essential nutrient thiamine (Vitamin B1).

Symptoms of alcohol-related dementia include:

- Memory loss, especially forming new memories
- Impaired focus, concentration & decision-making
- Challenges with problem-solving, planning & organization
- Emotional instability including irritability and mood swings
- Physical issues such as impaired balance & coordination

Like all dementias, this is a progressive disorder and develop gradually and worsen over IF the alcohol consumption continues.

The Center for Excellence provides an excellent Identification Test: Interview Version (<https://nida.nih.gov/sites/default/files/files/AUDIT.pdf>) which may be helpful if alcohol-related dementia is suspected.

The Center for Excellence recommends the following steps to recognize Alcohol Awareness Month in a nursing facility.

- Post the COE-NF [Effects of Alcohol on the Body flyer](#) in break rooms and common areas.
- Screen for alcohol misuse using the [Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test \(AUDIT\)](#).
- Add information about alcohol misuse to your newsletter. Share key facts, resources, and tips for healthy living with staff, residents, and families.
- Host an event where families can learn more about local resources for addiction. Invite addiction specialists, counselors, or health care providers to discuss alcohol misuse and provide information about available support services.
- Schedule free training on alcohol use disorder with the [COE-NF](#).
- Review resident charts to identify alcohol related conditions.

Substance Use Disorder is not a “fun” subject to bring up with resident or staff, but it is vital. And if the facility is dedicated to a “holistic” approach to care, alcohol use is an important subject to address.