Avoiding Risky Drinking

Are your drinking habits putting your health and safety at risk? Learn how to recognize when your drinking has become a problem.

In many cultures, drinking alcohol is a regular part of socializing and celebrating. However, alcohol can be a powerful drug, and consuming too much of it can put your safety and health—even your life—at risk. Long-term overindulgence can cause serious damage to your health. Additionally, alcohol can interact negatively with many common medications.

TAKING A HEALTHY APPROACH

If you don't already drink, the recommendation from *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*[1] is not to start. The reason for this is that even though there have been studies that show benefits to moderate drinking other studies have shown a link between moderate alcohol consumption and increased risk of violence, drowning, breast cancer, and injuries from falls and motor vehicle collisions.

However, if you do drink, the recommendation for moderate drinking for women is: 1 "drink" or less per day; for men: 2 "drinks" or less per day; and for people 65 and older: 1 "drink" or less per day. A standard "drink" is generally equal to a bottle of beer, a glass of wine, a shot of distilled liquor, or a cocktail or mixed drink.

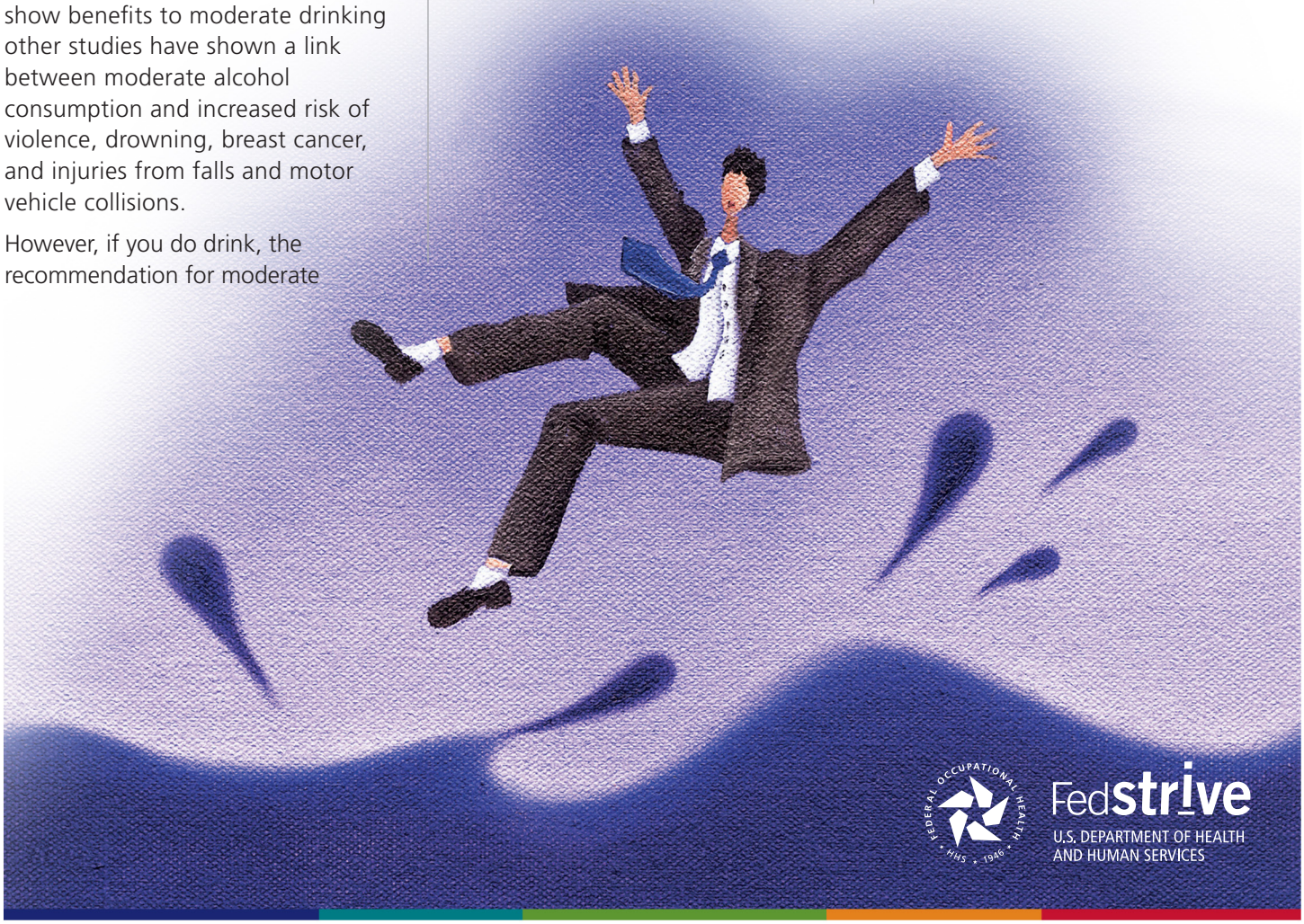
TOO MUCH, TOO OFTEN: "AT-RISK" DRINKING

According to the National Institutes of Health, "at risk" or "heavy" drinking for men is more than 4 standard drinks in one day or more than 14 standard drinks in one week. For women its more than 3 standard drinks in one day or more than 7 standard drinks in one week.

TOO MUCH, TOO FAST: BINGE DRINKING

Binge drinking is a dangerous pattern of drinking that can put your health and safety at serious risk. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines binge drinking as drinking that raises your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) to 0.08 percent[2] or higher.

A rough way to estimate this for women is: 4 or more standard "drinks" within 2 hours; for men: 5 or more standard "drinks" within 2 hours.



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FOH Publication 13.0052

ALCOHOL DEPENDENCE

Alcohol dependence or alcoholism occurs when you have trouble controlling your use of alcohol and you need alcohol to function normally. Alcoholism is a serious condition and should be dealt with right away.

Some characteristics of alcohol dependence are:

– Craving alcohol

– Needing more drinks to get a euphoric feeling or "high"

– Having a hard time controlling the number of drinks consumed, once you've started drinking

– Having withdrawal symptoms when you try to quit

The good news is that help is available from numerous sources. If you find that you have become dependent on alcohol, seek help immediately. There are counseling services through your EAP, a 24-hour help line through SAMHSA[3] at **1-800-662-HELP (4357)**, or you can find your local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous online at **www.aa.org** or by looking in your local phone book. If you're concerned about a family member, please contact your EAP, or find resources through Al-Anon at **al-anon.org**.

REDUCING YOUR RISK

If you don't drink, don't start. If you do drink, do so in moderation—that's one standard "drink" or less per day if you're a woman and two standard "drinks" or less per day if you're a man. Depending on certain health and psychological conditions, you may still have problems even if you drink within these limits. Consult with a health care professional if you have any questions about whether or not you should drink.

[1] A U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) publication

[2] The legal limit for operating a noncommercial motor vehicle

[3] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Another helpful resource is the National Institute of Health's Rethinking Drinking at **http://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/**.

NOTES:

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