Senior binge-drinkers hit the bottle most often, study finds

More young adults drink, but elderly overindulge to the extreme more often

By Bob LaMendola, Sun Sentinel

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Which group of binge drinkers overindulge most often? Not college students or the nightclub crowd. It's senior citizens, says a study released Tuesday by federal researchers.

A larger percentage of young adults binge drink, and they down more drinks when they do. But seniors who indulge to the extreme do so 5.5 times per month on average, well above the 4 times a month by those under age 45, the study showed.

"They are typically alone and in isolation, often drinking in response to some problem in their lives," said Stephen Ferrante, coordinator of a social work program on aging issues at Florida Atlantic University.

The finding on seniors came from the annual report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has focused mostly on extreme drinking by teens and young adults.

The CDC defines binge drinking as five drinks for a man, or four for a woman, in a short time. The results, from phone surveys of almost 500,000 people last year, found that more than 38 million adults binge drink every year.

That contributes to more than 80,000 deaths and $200 billion in economic costs each year. Binge drinking leads to auto accidents, alcohol-related disease, the spread of HIV and STD, unplanned pregnancies and violent acts, the CDC said.

Seniors proved to be the least likely to binge drink, with only 3.8 percent saying they do, compared to 28 percent of those ages 18 to 34 and 17.1 percent of the population overall. Perhaps related, Florida ranked 17th lowest in binge drinking with 16.7 percent of those surveyed saying they do.

Ferrante said about two-thirds of seniors who abuse alcohol have been doing so their whole lives and have not been able to stop. But one-third start drinking in their older years, usually alone at home in response to troubles such as loss of a spouse, illness and financial problems, he said.

Lauderhill former alcoholic Eduardo Melendez faced all of those when he was binge drinking. He made a fortune as a travel booker, but lost it by buying a shopping center that failed. The crisis sent him deeper into the bottle. His wife and daughter broke away and eventually he landed in the hospital.
"When the business started going wrong, I found an escape," Melendez said. "For a lot of the older people, you live by yourself, you are all alone, all you do is sit and think. And drink."

Now 68, he is sober and reconnected with his family, through the Broward County unit of the statewide Brief Intervention and Treatment for Elders program.

Seniors in treatment have more success overcoming alcohol and drug problems than do other ages, Ferrante said. For information on where to get help, call 211.