ALCOHOL AND WOMEN

Alcohol is yet another health issue for women. Drinking, even in small amounts, affects women differently than men. And heavy drinking, in some ways, is much more risky for women than it is for men. No amount of drinking is 100 percent safe, 100 percent of the time, for every individual woman. With this in mind, it’s important to know how alcohol can affect women’s health and safety.

Alcohol, Women, and Men

About one third of U.S. women drink alcohol. Of these women who drink, only one out of ten averages two or more drinks a day. Interestingly, according to a 2008 study of K-State students, 12% of men do not drink alcohol and only 9% of females do not drink.

Why is there a difference between women and men in how alcohol affects the body? Alcohol passes through the digestive tract and is dispersed in the water in the body. The more water available, the more diluted the alcohol. Even matched pound for pound with men, women have less water in their bodies, so a woman’s brain and other organs are exposed to more alcohol before it is broken down. This difference plays a role in both the short- and long-term effects of alcohol on women.

Risks

- Alcoholic liver disease: Women develop alcoholic liver disease more quickly and after drinking less alcohol than men. Women are more likely than men to develop alcoholic hepatitis (liver inflammation) and to die from cirrhosis.

- Brain disease: Most alcoholics have some loss of mental function, reduced brain size, and changes in the function of brain cells. Research suggests that women are more vulnerable than men to alcohol-induced brain damage.

- Cancer: Many studies report that heavy drinking increases the risk of breast cancer. Research suggests that, in some women, as little as one drink per day can slightly raise the risk of breast cancer. In fact, according to Denmark’s Center for Alcohol Research, for each alcoholic drink consumed in a week, breast cancer risk rose 2 percent. Women who were weekly binge drinkers (4 or more drinks in one sitting) increased their risk by 55 percent compared to those who had only one drink. Alcohol is also linked to cancers of the head and neck (the risk is especially high in smokers who also drink heavily), the liver, rectum and digestive tract.
Heart disease: Chronic heavy drinking is a leading cause of cardiovascular disease. Among heavy drinkers, men and women have similar rates of alcohol-related heart disease, even though most women drink less alcohol over a lifetime than men.

Assault: Drinking alcohol increases the risk that a woman will be assaulted physically or sexually.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome
Alcohol can damage the baby of a mother who drinks during pregnancy, resulting in a set of birth defects called fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). FAS is the most common known preventable cause of mental impairment. Babies with FAS have distinctive changes in their facial features and they may be born small. The brain damage that occurs with FAS can result in life-long problems with learning, memory, attention, and problem solving. These alcohol-related changes in the brain may be present even in babies whose appearance and growth are not affected. It is not known if there is any safe drinking level during pregnancy; nor is there any stage of pregnancy in which drinking—at any level—is known to be risk free.

If a woman is pregnant, or wants to become pregnant, it seems reasonable to not drink alcohol. Even if she is pregnant and has already consumed alcohol, it is important to stop drinking for the rest of her pregnancy. Stopping can still reduce the chances that her child might be affected by alcohol.

Heavy Drinking
An estimated 4 million women in the United States drink in a way that threatens their health, safety, and general well-being. A strong case can be made that heavy drinking is more risky for women than men:

- Heavy drinking significantly increases a woman's risk of violent and sexual assault.

Over the long term, women who drink heavily develop alcohol-related diseases more quickly and after drinking less alcohol than men.

Adolescence
Despite the fact that drinking is illegal for anyone under the age of 21, the reality is that many adolescent girls drink. Research shows, for example, that about 41 percent of 9th grade girls—usually about 14 years old—report drinking in the past month. (This rate is about the same for 9th grade boys.) Even more alarming, a little more than 20 percent of these same young girls report having had 5 or more drinks on a single occasion during the previous month.

Young people who begin drinking before age 15 have a 40 percent higher risk of developing alcohol abuse or alcoholism some time in their lives than those who wait until age 21 to begin drinking. This increased risk is the same for young girls as it is for boys.

Women in Young and Middle Adulthood
Young women in their 20's and early 30's are more likely to drink than older women. No one factor predicts whether a woman will have problems with alcohol, or at what age she is most at risk. However, there are some aspects of a woman's life experience that seem to make problem drinking more likely. For example, on college campuses, assaults, unwanted sexual advances, and unplanned and unsafe sex are all more likely among students who drink heavily on occasion (for women, four or more drinks in a row is considered heavy drinking).

Women and Stress
Stress is a common theme in most women's lives. Research confirms that one of the reasons people say they drink is to help them cope with stress. However, the role of stress in causing problem drinking in people is not clear. Research suggests that
women who have trouble with their closest relationships tend to drink more than other women. Heavy drinking is more common among women who have never married, are living unmarried with a partner, or are divorced or separated. A woman whose husband drinks heavily is more likely than other women to drink heavily. In addition, many studies have found that women who suffered childhood sexual abuse are more likely to have drinking problems. Depression is also closely linked to heavy drinking in women, and women who drink at home alone are more likely than others to have drinking problems.

Other factors that research suggests make excessive drinking more likely include having parents and siblings (or other family members related by blood) with alcohol problems, or having an excessive high tolerance for consuming large quantities of alcohol. The presence of any of these factors is a good reason to be especially careful with drinking alcohol.

Older Women

Older women, more than any other group, use medications that can affect mood and thought. Many such “psychoactive” medications, such as those for anxiety and depression, can interact with alcohol in harmful ways. Aging seems to reduce the body’s ability to adapt to alcohol. Older adults reach higher blood levels of alcohol even when drinking the same amount as younger people.

Alcohol problems among older women are also often mistaken for other aging-related conditions. As a result, alcohol problems may be misdiagnosed and go untreated by health care providers.

Some information for this newsletter was taken from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. For more information on alcohol abuse and alcoholism, please visit www.niaaa.nih.gov
For more information on women’s health research, please visit orwh.od.nih.gov

Interesting New Research

**Female Alcoholics Have Heart Damage Even After Quitting**
According to the researchers at Dartmouth Medical School, female alcoholics who experienced temporary high blood pressure in the first few days after they stopped drinking were more likely to continue to have cardiovascular problems after their blood pressure returned to normal a few weeks later.

**Alcohol and Unsafe Sex**
Women who consume more than five alcoholic drinks at a sitting have more sex partners and are more likely to engage in anal sex and other high-risk behaviors, leading to a rise in STD’s such as gonorrhea, according to John Hopkins University.

**Women Overestimate Amount Men Want Them To Drink**
New research from Loyola Marymount University reports that women overestimated by an average amount of one-and-a-half drinks, the number of alcoholic beverages men wanted their female friends, dates, or girlfriends to drink.

**Three Out of Four Women Drink Before Sex**
The Melbourne Herald-Sun reports that three out of four married and/or single women like to drink before sex. About half of the women surveyed like being tipsy during sex because it lowers their inhibitions. Six percent said they had never had sex while sober, while 14 percent said they can’t sleep with their significant other without drinking first.
## QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE TO HOW ALCOHOL AFFECTS A WOMAN’S BODY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brain</td>
<td>Drinking alcohol leads to a loss of coordination, poor judgment, slowed reflexes, distorted vision, loss of memory, and even blackouts. Female drinkers also lose brain volume more quickly. Research suggests that women are more susceptible to brain related changes from alcohol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>Drinking alcohol can cause blood pressure to rise, increase heart rate, cause the heart to beat abnormally, and can increase the size of your heart. Drinking heavily can lead to heart disease, which is the number one killer of women in the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomach</td>
<td>Drinking alcohol significantly increases the total number of empty calories one consumes, which can cause excessive weight gain. Drinking alcohol can also cause stomach ulcers and cancer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liver</td>
<td>Drinking alcohol could cause diseases such as cirrhosis. It also can cause hepatitis (inflamed liver) or even liver cancer, which weakens the liver’s ability to clot and keep blood free from poisons and bacteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproductive System</td>
<td>Heavy drinking can cause painful menstrual cycles, heavy flow, discomfort before your period (PMS), and irregular periods. Taking an oral contraceptive also makes a woman more vulnerable to the negative effects of alcohol.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### RESOURCES

**KSU Counseling Services**  
English/Counseling Services Bldg.  
Phone: 532-6927

**KSU Alcohol & Other Drug Education Service**  
Director: Bill Arck  
214 English/Counseling Services Bldg.  
Phone: 532-6927

**Alcoholics Anonymous**  
Noon Meeting (Mon.-Sat.)  
Blue Valley United Methodist Church  
835 Church Ave.  
Phone: 537-9260

The intent of Higher Education is to provide accurate, timely information representing the current state of alcohol/drug knowledge. Keep in mind that research on these matters continues daily and is subject to change. It is our intention to keep you informed, not to diagnose or treat illness. For personal alcohol and other drug problems, please consult your physician or counselor.

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