

Women & alcohol

Can women drink as much as men?

It does not take heavy drinking over a long period to create alcohol-related problems in women.

Binge drinking on the weekend, at parties, or when on holidays is a reality for almost three-quarters of 14-19 year old girls and more than a third of 18-24 year old women in Australia. This puts them at greater risk from serious alcohol related diseases than men.

Who is at risk?

Women who drink more than two drinks a day and drink on more than five days of each week are at risk.

Studies also show that women who do not have multiple roles are more likely to develop problems with drinking. So women who are young, professional, have no children or are single are more at risk.

Alcohol and intoxication

Women become intoxicated faster than men. Even allowing for body weight differences, a woman will attain a higher blood alcohol concentration than a man from the same amount of alcohol.

Women also have a higher ratio of fat to water than men and so are less able to dilute alcohol within the body. This also contributes to women reaching a higher blood alcohol level than men after drinking the same amount.

What are the risks?

Alcohol can cause many problems, both acute and chronic. Women who are heavy drinkers are more susceptible to alcoholism than men.

Alcohol and liver damage

Women do not have as much of the protective enzyme called alcohol dehydrogenase (ADH) in their liver as men. ADH breaks down alcohol and is the first line of defence against alcohol poisoning. This lesser amount of ADH makes women more prone to alcohol induced liver and brain damage.

Women develop alcohol related liver disease such as cirrhosis after a shorter period of heavy drinking and at a lower level of daily drinking than men.

Alcohol and secret women's business

Some women find they are more easily affected by alcohol while ovulating or when they are premenstrual due to differences in hormonal levels.

For some women who take the contraceptive pill it takes longer to get rid of alcohol in their bodies than women who are not on the pill.

Heavy drinking over long periods of time may lead to infertility.

Alcohol and pregnancy

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy may result in damage to the foetus. The damage to the child may include low attention span, distractibility and slow reaction times.

There is no firm agreement on the level of drinking at which damage can occur. It is safest to avoid alcohol during pregnancy and when trying to conceive.

Foetal alcohol syndrome may occur in the children of heavy and dependent drinkers. These characteristics may include abnormally small head and eyes, defective development of face, heart and genital defects, as well as intellectual/learning and developmental problems.

Alcohol and breast cancer

Women who drink more than three glasses of wine a day have a three-fold increase in the risk of breast cancer.

Drinking and driving

It is safest not to drink alcohol at all if you are going to drive. It is illegal to drive with a blood alcohol level greater than 0.05. For women to avoid this they should have no more than one standard drink in the first hour and no more than one every hour after that.

Sharing a bottle of wine

Sharing equally a bottle of wine with a man regularly can result in a greater number and severity of alcohol related problems for the woman.

How much is safe?

A standard drink is equal to about 10 grams of pure alcohol, ie. a glass of wine, a nip of spirits, one middy of regular beer, or two midis of light beer.

Remember the recommended guidelines: no more than two standard drinks a day (men can drink



WOMEN

No more than 2 standard drinks a day

up to four) and at least two alcohol free days a week.

Useful websites:

- www.adf.org.au/drughit/facts
- www.ceida.net.au/tools_for_workers/drugs/alcohol.html
- www.drugarm.com.au/drug_info/fact_sheets/alcohol.htm
- www.health.gov.au/hfs/pubs/drug/alc_hand/alc_ch3.htm

Want more information about alcohol? Talk to your GP.