

Alcohol and women

Whether it's teenage girls binge drinking illicitly, women in their 20s and 30s drinking as part of their busy social lives and careers, or older women drinking more at home, alcohol has become a greater part of women's lives over the past half century.

There are many reasons for this. Since the 1960s, the number of women working has steadily increased. Women have more disposable income and often fewer family responsibilities, meaning more time and money for drinking. Women drinking has also become much more socially acceptable, with pubs no longer being male dominated. Then there's the constant bombardment of alcohol advertising specifically aimed at women.⁽¹⁾

FACTS and FIGURES

Government health experts recommend that women shouldn't regularly drink more than two to three units a day – equivalent to a couple of small (125ml) glasses of wine. Regularly having more than this can damage your health. It is also recommended that you don't drink every day.

Binge drinking – defined as drinking twice the recommended daily guideline (ie 6 units for women) – is potentially harmful.

The majority of women do stick to these guidelines, although a significant minority do not, and could be causing themselves damage as a result. The latest figures show that:

- A third of women drink more than the recommended daily guidelines. Around one in 14 women drink every day.⁽²⁾
- 6% of women drink at 'harmful' levels – more than 35 units per week.⁽³⁾
- Around 29 out of every 1,000 women are dependent on alcohol.⁽⁴⁾
- According to a recent survey, the average woman drinks 9.2 units of alcohol per week, equivalent to around one bottle of wine.⁽⁵⁾

- The average number of units women drink in a week decreases with age; from 11.3 units for those aged 16-24 to 5.3 units for women aged 65 and over.⁽⁶⁾
- Over 15,000 women were admitted to hospital in 2006-7 with an alcohol-related problem.⁽⁷⁾
- Around 3,000 women die each year due to the direct effects of alcohol.⁽⁸⁾ But there are some estimates that implicate alcohol in 33,000 adult deaths a year.⁽⁹⁾
- Wine accounts for over half (60%) of all the alcohol women drink. Spirits makes up 16%, beer and cider 12% and alcopops 5%.⁽¹⁰⁾
- Better-off women drink more than their poorer counterparts. When questioned for a Government survey, over two-thirds of women in households with a weekly income over £1,000 reported drinking in the previous week compared with only 39% in households with an income of £200 or less.⁽¹¹⁾

PROGRESSION

Women's bodies, in general, can't process alcohol as well as men's. That's because:

- The average woman weighs less than the average man and so has less tissue to absorb alcohol.⁽¹³⁾
- Women have a proportionally higher ratio of fat to water than men and are therefore less able to dilute alcohol within the body. Because of this, women will have a higher concentration of alcohol in their blood than men after drinking the same amounts of alcohol.⁽¹⁴⁾
- It's thought that women generally have lower levels of alcohol dehydrogenase (AHD) activity in their livers, so the alcohol stays longer in the system before being metabolised and therefore has greater effect.⁽¹⁵⁾

Women's health and alcohol

Drinking too much can lead to a range of health problems for women, including infertility and breast cancer. Have a look at our factsheets homepage at www.drinkaware.co.uk/health-facts for information about all the health problems alcohol can cause, for both women and men.

Drinking when you're pregnant can damage your baby. See our factsheet on Alcohol and pregnancy for more information.

Safety and alcohol

If you become drunk, your judgement is impaired, which can lead to dangerous situations, especially for women.

- A survey on young women and alcohol for *Company* magazine found that two-thirds of respondents had woken up the morning after drinking with almost no recollection of what had happened the night before, while one in 10 had had to be escorted home by a stranger. Three in 10 had lost keys, money and other valuables during a drunken night out.⁽¹⁶⁾
- One survey found that one in six women have had unsafe sex after drinking too much.⁽¹⁷⁾
- The number of women arrested for being drunk and disorderly rose by more than half in five years, up from 3,847 in 2003-4 to 5,891 in 2007.⁽¹⁸⁾

ADVICE and GETTING HELP

If you are worried that alcohol could be affecting your physical or mental health, visit your GP. They can run tests, offer advice and support, and/or refer you to an appropriate specialist.

Drinkline – 0800 917 8282 – is a confidential helpline for those concerned about their own drinking or that of someone else. They can direct you to local support services

References

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