

Women and Alcohol

Women's drinking patterns are different from men's—especially when it comes to the type of beverage, amounts, and frequency. Women's bodies also react differently to alcohol than men's bodies. As a result, women face particular health risks and realities.

Women should be aware of the health risks associated with drinking alcohol, especially because most women drink at least occasionally, and many women drink a lot.



Why do women face higher risk?

Research shows that women start to have alcohol-related problems at lower drinking levels than men do. One reason is that, on average, women weigh less than men. In addition, alcohol disperses in body water, and pound for pound, women have less water in their bodies than men do. So after a man and woman of the same weight drink the same amount of alcohol, the woman's blood alcohol concentration will tend to be higher, putting her at greater risk for harm. Other biological differences, including hormones, may contribute, as well.

What are the health risks?

Liver Damage:

Women who drink are more likely to develop alcoholic hepatitis (liver inflammation) than men who drink the same amount of alcohol. Alcoholic hepatitis can lead to cirrhosis.

Heart Disease:

Chronic heavy drinking is a leading cause of heart disease. Among heavy drinkers, women are more susceptible to alcohol-related heart disease than men, even though women drink less alcohol over a lifetime than men.

Breast Cancer:

There is an association between drinking alcohol and developing breast cancer. Women who consume about one drink per day have a 10 percent higher chance of developing breast cancer than women who do not drink at all.

Pregnancy:

Any drinking during pregnancy is risky. A pregnant woman who drinks heavily puts her fetus at risk for learning and behavioral problems and abnormal facial features. Even moderate drinking during pregnancy can cause problems. Drinking during pregnancy also may increase the risk for preterm labor.

Some women should never drink at all, including:

- Anyone under age 21
- Anyone who takes medications that can interact negatively with alcohol
- Anyone who is pregnant or trying to conceive

How much is too much?

A standard drink is roughly 14 grams of pure alcohol, which is found in:

- 12 ounces of beer
- 5 ounces of wine
- 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits

The USDA defines moderate drinking as:

- Up to 1 drink per day for women
- Up to 2 drinks per day for men



National Institutes of Health

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

The Statistics: How often and how much do women drink?

Selected consumption statistics for women and men: U.S. adults 18 years of age and older

| | Women | Men |
|---|-------|------|
| % who had at least 1 drink in the past year | 59.6 | 71.8 |
| % who had at least 1 drink in their lifetime, but not in the past year | 17.9 | 16.6 |
| % who had at least 1 drink in their lifetime | 77.5 | 88.4 |
| % total lifetime abstainers (not even 1 drink) | 22.5 | 11.6 |
| % of past-year drinkers, by usual number of drinks consumed per drinking day: | | |
| 1 | 48.2 | 28.7 |
| 2 | 29.9 | 29.0 |
| 3+ | 21.9 | 42.3 |
| % of past-year drinkers who drank 4+/5+ drinks on an occasion: | | |
| Never in past year | 71.2 | 56.9 |
| Ever in past year | 28.8 | 43.1 |
| 1 to 11 times in past year (<monthly) | 14.2 | 15.3 |
| 12+ times in past year (monthly or more often) | 14.6 | 27.8 |
| % who drank 12+ drinks over the course of the past year | 42.1 | 61.2 |
| % who drank 12+ drinks over the course of some year, but not the past year | 13.4 | 16.6 |
| % who never drank 12+ drinks over the course of any year | 44.5 | 22.2 |
| % of women who had a past-year pregnancy by drinking status: | | |
| Did not drink at all in the past year | 41.0 | |
| Drank during the past year, but not at all during pregnancy | 49.3 | |
| Drank but in reduced quantities during pregnancy | 8.1 | |
| Drank and did not reduce consumption during pregnancy | 1.5 | |

At Risk

NIAAA also defines how much drinking may put people at risk for developing alcohol dependence.

Low risk drinking limits are:

Women:

No more than 7 drinks per week and no more than 3 drinks on any single day.

Men:

No more than 14 drinks per week and no more than 4 drinks on any single day.

To stay low risk, you must keep within both the single-day and weekly limits.

Low risk does not mean no risk. Even within these limits, you can have problems if you drink too quickly or have other health issues. Drinking slowly, and making sure you eat enough while drinking, can help minimize alcohol's effects.

For more information please visit:

www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/



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