



February 2017 Newsletter

Women's Risky Drinking

Women are catching up with men in drinking...and alcohol-related illnesses.

This is troubling because the harm done to women's health happens faster and is more severe. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism explains the physiological differences between men and women like this: from the digestive tract, alcohol is diffused into water in the body, and since men tend to have more water in their bodies, the alcohol is more diluted. "Therefore, a woman's brain and other organs are exposed to more alcohol and to more of the toxic byproducts that result when the body breaks down and eliminates alcohol."

It also takes longer for women's bodies to metabolize (or break-down) alcohol, meaning impairment lasts longer. A 140-pound woman would have an increased risk of a drunk driving incident after having just one glass of wine on an empty stomach.

Even knowing how much one is drinking can be imprecise and confusing.

Unless one is pouring 5 ounces of wine (considered a "standard drink" at 12 % alcohol content) into a measuring cup and then into a wine glass, it is difficult to tell how much alcohol is being consumed. If the measurement is 8 ounces and the wine has a 14% alcohol content, that is almost 2 "standard drinks!"

Most guidelines say that to avoid binge drinking, women should not drink more than four drinks within a few hours. But, depending on the glass size and alcohol content, that could be two glasses of wine or one Long Island Iced Tea. The latter sometimes has enough alcohol to equate to 4 "standard

drinks" in one glass! And nowadays, craft beer can be much higher in alcohol content, so it pays to check.

Being able to drink other people "under the table" is less a sign of being immune to the effects of alcohol than an indication of being vulnerable to problems such as dependence.

But popular culture ignores this and shows images of women chugging box wine or throwing back shots of vodka. These images mirror real life for some and further normalize this kind of drinking for others. New brands have been created and marketed to women. Products touted as low calorie or low carb with sweetened flavors come in packaging meant to appeal to women.

This harkens back to when cigarettes were marketed to women as a sign of equality. That normalization resulted in a spike in smoking-related cancers and other illnesses in women. Equality in morbidity and illness is not a goal anyone would strive for.

Several brands of wine humorously refer

From the Center for Disease Control and Prevention Fact Sheet "Excessive Alcohol Use and Risks to Women's Health"

- Approximately 46% of adult women report drinking alcohol in the last 30 days.
- Approximately 12% of adult women report binge drinking 3 times a month, averaging 5 drinks per binge.³
- Most (90%) people who binge drink are not alcoholics or alcohol dependent.
- About 2.5% of women and 4.5% of men met the diagnostic criteria for alcohol dependence in the past year.

to the stress of parenting young children and "Wine Mom" culture. For most women, an occasional glass of wine at the end of the day is safe enough, but for a growing number, binge

drinking and heavy drinking are taking a toll on their health. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention's fact sheet, *Excessive Alcohol Use and Risks to Women's Health*, is pretty sobering, pardon the pun. The risks of liver disease and sexual assault associated with excessive alcohol are pretty well known, but brain shrinkage, heart muscle damage and the risk of a number of cancers may not be common knowledge.

When women protect their own health and model moderation to a younger generation, it goes a long way in preventing alcohol harm and associated problems for their children. Mothers and fathers likely have more influence than they think on whether their kids drink alcohol. According to the *GfK Roper Report on Influences on Youth*, parents' attitudes have the biggest impact on teens about whether they drink. 70% said that parents have the strongest influence, followed by best friends at 10%. Kids who start drinking in their early teens are 40% more likely to have problems with alcohol in their lifetimes than those that wait until the legal drinking age.

And we have had success with lowering the rate of underage drinking. In 1991, the Monitoring the Future Survey found that 25% of 8th graders, 43% of 10th graders and 54% of 12th graders had consumed alcohol in the last month. In 2016 those numbers had declined to 7% of 8th graders, 20% of 10th graders and 33% of 12th graders. Reducing underage drinking was a priority for communities across the country and resources were put into making this happen.

As legislatures consider loosening alcohol regulations so that consumers will spend more money on alcohol to generate jobs and tax revenue, they need to consider the public health consequences. When alcohol is

sold in many places at many hours, it conveys the idea that it's "just a beverage" and harmless, when we know that just isn't the case. We all have an interest in reducing the huge social and public health costs of excessive drinking. According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, drinking among Americans rose 17.2% between 2005 and 2012 **primarily due to the increased rate of drinking for women**. That should get our attention!

Source:

British Medical Journal,
<http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/6/10/e011827>

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism,
<https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochurewomen/women.htm>

Center for Disease Control and Prevention,
<https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/womens-health.htm>

GfK Roper, *Youth Report on Influences on Youth Decisions about Drinking*

Monitoring the Future national survey results on drug use, 1975-2016, pg 79

[Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation](#),
University of Washington, *American Journal of Public Health*.
<http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302313>