



Women & Alcohol

Introduction

Up until the last 60 years, few women in our society drank alcohol. Since the 1940s, women's alcohol consumption has risen steadily. In most social contexts, drinking is strongly coded as male behaviour, so that when women are seen drinking, especially to excess, there is stronger social condemnation.

Sex Differences

Women come in different shapes and sizes, have different hormone and fat distributions, and as a result, have different physiological responses to drugs, including alcohol. Women's bodies are also different from men's.

These differences impact on the way women are affected by alcohol. They affect how much women can drink and how alcohol affects their health, both immediately and in the long term. Compared with men, women generally have:

- a smaller body size with higher percentage of body fat and less body water. Alcohol concentrates at higher levels in smaller amounts because there is less space to fill
- a smaller liver, so they are more susceptible to liver damage, i.e. cirrhosis
- a less active stomach enzyme (ADH) which breaks down alcohol.

Because of these differences, women are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol. In addition:

- Hormone concentrations affect metabolism, and therefore, women's menstrual cycles may affect the metabolism and absorption of alcohol.
- Alcohol consumption during pregnancy may cause complications, as alcohol crosses the placenta and can harm the developing foetus.

Gender Influences

In addition to sex differences, gender differences, which incorporate a social context, exist with regard to alcohol.

- Rates of drinking among young women are increasing and at some levels are exceeding those of young men.
- Other people's alcohol abuse places a significant burden on women. It can be said that women's greatest problem with drinking is their men's drinking.
- Women often take on the care of the drinking family member, and/or of their children.
- Women's drinking is less socially accepted than men's, therefore social stigma and fear of consequences mean women are more reluctant to admit to a drinking problem and seek help.
- Indigenous women are less likely to drink than non-Indigenous women, but those who do drink do so at riskier levels.
- When intoxicated, women are:
 - more likely than when sober to have unprotected sex, with risk of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy
 - at increased risk of violence and sexual assault.

Implications for the Future

Future research needs to address both sex and gender differences in relation to:

- patterns of use and impact of alcohol on women's health
- factors in the context of women's lives which influence alcohol use and abuse at all ages
- links between hormones and metabolism of alcohol including effects of the oral contraceptive pill and hormone therapy.

Treatment options that are focused on the reality and diversity of women's lives should be developed, as well as gender specific programs in health promotion and education.

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