



HOW ALCOHOL AFFECTS WOMEN

The effect of alcohol on the individual varies considerably. Much depends on the person's body weight and size, the speed at which they drink, their general state of fitness, whether they have eaten and the amount of alcohol consumed.

Alcohol is a depressant, not a stimulant. All alcoholic drinks contain Ethyl Alcohol, a powerful drug, and anyone who drinks regularly and excessively can become addicted.

Over-drinking can be harmful to both men and women, but holds special dangers for women. They are generally smaller and have proportionately more fat and less water in their bodies than men.

Alcohol is distributed in body fluids and is therefore more concentrated in a woman's system.

This means that women will:

- Become intoxicated more rapidly than men on the same amount of alcohol
- Feel the effects for a longer duration
- Be more likely to damage the liver through continued drinking

Drinking and pregnancy

Any substance entering the expectant mother's bloodstream also enters her baby's system. Extensive research has been ongoing for a number of years to discover how the foetus is affected and at what level of alcohol intake it is in danger.

Results show that a pregnant woman who drinks excessively is risking the health of her unborn child as well as her own. Babies born to mothers with a severe drink problem can be found to have certain physical and mental abnormalities. This is known as Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). Whether moderate drinking is harmful remains unclear. Medical opinion is divided. Some doctors advise complete abstinence during pregnancy. However, all agree that heavy and binge drinking are hazardous and should be avoided.

Perhaps the best message to pregnant women is: the less you drink, the better for you and the baby. An occasional drink may do no harm, but by cutting out drink completely you eliminate any possible risks.

Drinking for emotional reasons

Women often turn to the sedative effects of alcohol to try to alleviate the feelings of depression, frustration, loneliness, guilt or lack of self-esteem.

The feeling of well-being provided by alcohol is only temporary, but as alcohol is a depressant, these problems can resurface worse than ever when the effects of alcohol wear off.

Problem drinking is any form of drinking which causes continuing problems in any one area of a person's life. This can lead to dependence on alcohol.

Advice for women

If you decide to drink – drink moderately

1. It is advisable not to exceed the limits recommended by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (1996): two units per day per woman. Three units per day for men. A unit constitutes one glass of wine or a half pint glass of beer; one small glass of spirits is equivalent to one and a half units.
2. Avoid binge drinking at all times, it increases the risk of damage in many areas.
3. Cut down on your alcohol intake by alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks.
4. If you are worried about your drinking, contact your GP or local alcohol advice agency. Do not delay in asking for help.
5. Should you decide to have a baby, be cautious in your drinking habits.
6. If you are watching your weight, watch your alcohol intake. Alcohol has no nutritional values but is high in calories.

The following questions may help you to evaluate your drinking.

- a. Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
- b. Have people annoyed you by criticising your drinking?
- c. Have you ever felt worried about your drinking?
- d. Have you ever had a drink in the morning to steady your nerves or get over a hangover?

(If you answer "Yes" to two or more you may find you have a drink problem)

Other indicators – of a personal drinking problem

- Drinking faster than other people
- Ordering "doubles", sneaking drinks, etc.
- Avoiding social functions because they are alcohol-free
- Secret drinking, tipping during the day
- Out of character behaviour: aggression – physical or verbal
- Violence
- Deterioration of moral standards
- Breakdown of close relationships
- Disharmony in the home and among family
- Deterioration of personal appearance
- Financial problems
- Inability to cope with everyday problems
- Frequent absences from work
- Legal problems, e.g., drunk driving
- Depression – sometimes confused with menopausal symptoms
- A tendency to be unduly accident prone
- "Black out" or memory loss following a drinking episode

Seeking help

Help is readily available from agencies or treatment centres, details of which can be provided by contacting:

Your General Practitioner or the Local health board