



Alcohol and Women's Health

Because of their smaller size on average, body type, and the way their bodies process alcohol, women are:

- more quickly affected by alcohol than men are; and
- more vulnerable to long-term physical harm than males at equivalent amounts of alcohol.

Research shows that for women:

- drinking more than two standard drinks on any day increases the risk considerably of premature death over the lifetime of the drinker;
- drinking four standard drinks per day increases the risk of death due to alcohol ten-fold over one standard drink per day;
- the greater the amount of alcohol consumed, the higher the risk;
- extreme dieting and thinness increase the risk of effects from alcohol;
- approximately 2% of female deaths are alcohol-related, with the main cause of such deaths being stroke, followed by alcoholic liver cirrhosis, road injury, and breast cancer (35% higher in women who drink three to four standard drinks per day, and 67% with more than four standard drinks per day);
- there is a strong link between an aggressor being intoxicated and violence towards women (including sexual assault); alcohol is involved, in varying ways, in about 50% of cases of domestic physical and sexual violence;
- there is a significant increase in risk of injury (including from physical and sexual assault) when women consume more than four standard drinks in a session;
- two thirds of hospital admissions relating to alcohol consumption in elderly women over 84 yrs is a consequence of falls after drinking
- intoxication increases the risk of unplanned pregnancies and can harm the unborn child, especially in the first few weeks after conception;
- binge drinking is increasing amongst younger women and is associated with high-risk behaviour and harmful consequences, especially in relation to injuries, sexual assault and unplanned pregnancies; and
- possible maximum health benefits for the heart can be gained from less than one standard drink a day for women aged 45–50 years of age and older (see the fact sheet on alcohol and heart disease for more information on the possible protective effects of alcohol on the heart and the limitations of the research). However, alcohol is not necessary to achieve this health benefit, as it can be obtained by using other strategies, preferably in combination, such as stopping smoking, increasing exercise, improving diet, and taking small quantities of aspirin.

Women are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol and related harm at lower doses than men are because:

- alcohol, when it is absorbed, is distributed throughout the body's total water content, and since women, on average, have smaller bodies than men, a given amount of alcohol is distributed over a smaller body volume;
- women have a higher proportion of body fat, and alcohol is not taken up by fatty tissues;
- the ability to break down alcohol is limited by the size of the liver, and women on average have smaller livers than men. Therefore women are particularly susceptible to liver damage and fatal liver cirrhosis from alcohol; and
- the culture of "thinness" and dieting that particularly affects young women, also places them at increased risk of the effects of alcohol. Dieting leads to an excessive loss of body fluid, so that a given quantity of alcohol in a person who is dieting leads to an even higher concentration of alcohol within the body than for the average-sized person.

Recommended consumption levels for low-risk drinking

For healthy men and women, **drinking no more than two standard drinks on any day** reduces the **lifetime risk of harm** from alcohol-related disease or injury.

Drinking **no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion** reduces the risk of alcohol-related **injury** arising from that occasion.

For children and young people under 18 years of age, not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

For women who are pregnant, planning a pregnancy, or breastfeeding, not drinking is the safest option.

Further reductions in the lifetime risk of alcohol-related disease or injury can be achieved by reducing the number of occasions of drinking across a lifetime, for example through regular alcohol-free days.

You can find more information on the recommended levels of alcohol consumption in the Guidelines for Alcohol Consumption Fact Sheet.

Adapted from

Australian Department of Health and Ageing, Australian Alcohol Guidelines Fact Sheets www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au

Guidelines source

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) (2009). *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Other sources

Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (2006). *National Alcohol Strategy, 2006–2009, Towards Safer Drinking Cultures*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Women's vulnerability to the effects of alcohol can pose severe risks to their safety.

YOUR HEALTH AND ALCOHOL