

# 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 are more vulnerable to long-term physical harm than males.

## 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.

## HIGH-RISK CONSUMPTION FOR WOMEN

- Drinking more than 2 standard drinks on any day increases the risk considerably of premature death over her lifetime;
- Drinking 4 standard drinks per day increases the risk of death ten-fold compared to 1 standard drink per day;
- The greater the amount of alcohol consumed, the higher the risk;
- It appears that the gap between young males and females for binge drinking is closing; this observation seems to be supported by increasing alcohol-related hospitalisations for women;
- Approximately 2% of female deaths are alcohol-related.

## TYPES OF ALCOHOL-RELATED HARM

- strokes, followed by alcoholic liver cirrhosis, road injury, and breast cancer (a woman has a 15% increased risk of breast cancer from as little as 3-6 standard drinks a week! – 3 standard drinks a day elevates the risk by 50% and the risk continues to rise by about 10% for each additional drink);
- As for men, women also have an increased risk of a wide range of cancers from drinking above the low-risk limits, including gastric, liver, colorectal (bowel), oral and oesophagus (just as for breast cancer, the risk of oral and oesophageal cancer increases from regular drinking i.e. from 1 standard drink a 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;
- Intoxication increases the risk of unprotected sex with increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancies
- Drinking can harm the unborn child, especially in the first few weeks after conception; even moderate, regular, pre-natal drinking is associated with small cognitive deficits in a child whilst heavy drinking can lead to Fetal Alcohol Effects/Syndrome in a child
- Two-thirds of hospital admissions relating to alcohol consumption in elderly women over 84 years of age is a consequence of falls after drinking

Other issues to consider include the effects of alcohol on:

- Weight gain
- Sleep disturbance
- Poorer reproductive health
- Reduced bone density

### **Are there any health benefits for women from alcohol?**

Maximum health benefits for the heart can be gained from just one standard drink a day (possibly even less) 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, this very slight benefit has to be weighed up against the risk of alcohol-related diseases from low consumption, especially breast cancer. Additionally, alcohol is not necessary to achieve this heart-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.

## 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.

**Adapted from** Australian Department of Health and Ageing, Australian Alcohol Guidelines Fact Sheets [www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au](http://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:** Bagnardi, V., et al (2013). Light alcohol drinking and cancer: a meta-analysis, *Annals of Oncology*, v24(2), 301-308.

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

## YOUR HEALTH AND ALCOHOL