

Women and Alcohol

AWARE

Action on Women's Addictions –
Research & Education



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Centre for Addiction and Mental Health
Centre de toxicomanie et de santé mentale



Alcohol is a drug

Many people don't think of alcohol as a drug. But consider this: drugs can affect the way you think, act and feel. Some drugs change your mood, and some are painkillers. Alcohol does all of these things, so it is a drug.

The physical effects of alcohol on women

The same amount of alcohol affects a woman more than a man. This is because women have less water in their bodies than men. So alcohol is less watered down in women's bodies. Alcohol also does *more* physical damage to women *more quickly* than it does to men.

Over time, too much alcohol can cause serious health problems, such as damage to your liver, heart, stomach and brain. Heavy drinking may also increase the risk of menstrual problems and some forms of cancer.

You are more likely to develop serious health problems if you also smoke cigarettes.

Alcohol, pregnancy and breast-feeding

PREGNANCY

If you drink when you are pregnant, alcohol passes through your bloodstream and into the fetus. Alcohol can affect how the fetus develops. *There is no known safe amount you can drink when you're pregnant to prevent this harm.* But the more heavily you drink, the more you're likely:

- to lose the baby (have a miscarriage or a baby that is stillborn)
- to have a baby that is very small (underweight)
- to have a baby born early (premature)
- to have a baby with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) which can involve brain damage, slow growth, vision and hearing problems, and other birth defects. People whose mothers drank during pregnancy can have lifelong learning and memory problems.

The chance of harming the fetus is affected by how much you drink, whether you are also using other drugs, your overall health and safety, and many other factors.

For information about fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, call Motherisk's Alcohol and Substance Use Helpline at 1 877 FAS-INFO (1 877 327-4636).

*It's safest not to drink when you're pregnant.
Less is better. None is best!*

There is no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy. The brain and nervous system of the fetus develop all through pregnancy. But it is never too late to stop drinking during pregnancy. Quitting drinking now and looking after your own health are the best ways to ensure your baby is healthy.

The father's drinking may affect his sperm. No one knows yet what effect this may have on the fetus or the baby. The father's drinking can affect *you* too. It may be harder for you not to drink, or to drink very little, if your partner is drinking heavily.

BREAST-FEEDING

Breast-feeding is one of the best things you can do for your baby. But a little bit of any alcohol you drink passes into your breast milk. People disagree about the amount that can cause problems. It depends on how much and when you drink. Anything more than an occasional drink is not recommended.

If you drink regularly and breast-feed, that can affect how well the baby reacts to the world around him or her (this is called “psychomotor development”). Heavy drinking can also affect your “letdown”—the flow of milk into your nipples so the baby can feed.

If you do drink alcohol before you breast-feed, your baby may not drink as much of your milk, and he or she may sleep more often, but for a shorter time. How long the alcohol will stay in the breast milk depends on factors such as how many drinks you have, how quickly you drink, and your body weight.

So, if you do drink, plan to feed your baby first. If you have a drink right *after* you breast-feed, your body has more time to get rid of the alcohol before the next feeding time.

Talk with your doctor about the risks to your baby's health before you decide what to do. And remember: it's not just your baby's health that's a concern, it's *yours* too.

Alcohol and other drugs

It can be dangerous to drink if you take other drugs at the same time or close together. This includes prescription medications, medications you can buy at the pharmacy without a prescription, and illegal drugs.

The effects of combining alcohol with medications can depend on various factors, including:

- your age
- your body weight and type
- your general health
- how much you have drunk and the dose of medication you have taken
- how much food you have eaten
- how much you have slept
- your level of tolerance to the effects of alcohol and your medication.

Always check with your pharmacist or doctor first. Find out how safe it is to drink when you take any other drugs. Do not stop your medication suddenly, even just for the weekend, because:

- there will still be medication in your system, which may interact with the alcohol
- you risk a return of any symptoms that the medication is treating.

When you start a new medication or change the dose, it is usually best not to drink. If you do, the results can be unpredictable, and the alcohol may make your symptoms and/or side-effects worse. Once you have been on the medication for a while, check with your doctor to see if a glass or two of alcohol is OK.

DRUGS THAT INCREASE THE EFFECT OF ALCOHOL

All psychiatric medications and some pain medications work in the brain. Many of these medications sedate (slow down) your mind and body. This is also something that alcohol does. For this reason, combining alcohol with these sedative medications will likely increase side-effects. In some cases, the combination can be very dangerous.

It can:

- make one drink have the effect of two or three drinks or, with some sedative medications, even more
- cause difficulty with breathing
- slow your thinking and make it hard to concentrate
- make you lose consciousness (pass out) or even die.

Even if the combination seems only to make you slightly drowsy, do not drive or operate heavy machinery, because you may be impaired.

Some of these sedative drugs are:

- **Anticonvulsants** (anti-seizure medications). These medications can be used to treat seizure disorders and/or bipolar disorder. Examples are Epival, Tegretol and Neurontin. If you combine these medications with alcohol, you will probably feel drowsy and possibly nauseous. Also, alcohol (especially alcohol withdrawal) can make you more likely to have a seizure.
- **Antihistamines**. These drugs are often taken for allergies or cold symptoms. Examples are Benadryl and Contac-C. Another antihistamine, often taken for nausea, is Gravol. Check with your doctor or pharmacist about whether you can drink at all when you're taking antihistamines.
- **Barbiturates**. These are very powerful drugs, and they can be dangerous. They are rarely prescribed any more, with the exception of the butalbital (in Fiorinal capsules) and phenobarbital. Never drink alcohol and take barbiturates.
- **Benzodiazepines**. Examples of these drugs that are commonly prescribed are lorazepam (Ativan), clonazepam (Rivotril) and diazepam (Valium). It's very important to drink nothing or very, very little if you're taking any of these medications—*check with your doctor*.
- **Opioid pain medications**. You can get these medications by prescription (examples are Tylenol 3s, morphine and OxyContin) or over the counter from the pharmacist (examples are Tylenol 1s and 222s). Combining these

medications with alcohol adds to the effect. This will make you drowsy, and can also lead to dizziness, confusion, slowed breathing, and even overdose and death. Check with your doctor or pharmacist about whether you can drink at all when you're taking opioids. These medications should normally be used only for a short time. If you are on them for longer than a few weeks, ask your doctor about other medications or alternative pain treatments, such as physiotherapy.

DRUGS THAT HAVE OTHER NEGATIVE EFFECTS WHEN TAKEN WITH ALCOHOL

- **Antidepressants.** These drugs are usually (but not always) prescribed to relieve depression. They include SSRIs (examples are fluoxetine [Prozac], paroxetine [Paxil] and citalopram [Celexa]), and others such as venlafaxine (Effexor) and mirtazapine (Remeron). In the first few weeks on an antidepressant, alcohol may make your symptoms of depression or anxiety worse, and you may have increased side-effects. Once you are feeling well, one or two drinks should be OK—but remember that one drink will have the effect of two or maybe three drinks.
- **Antipsychotics.** These drugs are used to treat psychosis or other psychiatric disorders such as bipolar disorder or severe anxiety. Examples are Risperdal, Zyprexa and Seroquel. Combining antipsychotics with alcohol may cause drowsiness, increase side-effects or symptoms, and/or make you less co-ordinated or cause other movement problems.

- **Antibiotics.** These drugs are used to fight infections. Examples are penicillin and tetracycline. Some antibiotics don't work as well when combined with alcohol, or the combination can cause nausea or upset stomach. One antibiotic in particular, metronidazole (Flagyl), can cause a potentially severe reaction when combined with alcohol; you can get a headache and become flushed, sweaty, nauseous and very sick. This interaction can happen for up to three days after you finish the medication.
- **Non-opioid pain medications.** You can buy some pain medications, such as ASA (aspirin) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), without a prescription. Combining alcohol with these medications can damage your stomach lining, which can cause stomach bleeding. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) can cause liver problems when taken with alcohol—sometimes even when taken the next day for a hangover.

Women and safe drinking

Alcohol *can* be used safely. People drink for many reasons—maybe to socialize, to feel good, to relax.

Alcohol can seem harmless. It's legal and easy to buy. Many people drink, and most people who drink cautiously don't develop problems. For women past menopause, a drink every other day may even help prevent heart problems. But there are other ways to prevent heart problems. So this doesn't mean that you should start having a drink every other day if you usually drink less than this. And it doesn't mean you should start drinking if you don't drink at all now. Talk about it with your doctor.

Remember that alcohol is a drug, and drugs have to be treated with respect. Some recommendations for safer drinking follow. But remember, even the following amount of drinking can be too much for you if you:

- are underage
- are older
- are pregnant or breast-feeding
- have a small body build
- have physical or mental health problems
- take any other drugs
- are driving a vehicle or operating any other machinery
- have had problems with alcohol or other drugs in the past.

1. Know how much alcohol is in a drink.

The same amount of alcohol is in:

- 1 beer (regular strength)
- 1 five-ounce glass of table wine
- 1 wine cooler
- 1 three-ounce glass of sherry
- 1¹/₂ ounces of liquor, liqueur or brandy.

2. Don't drink every day.

There should be at least one day a week when you don't drink at all. This is especially important for women. Women's bodies are harmed more, and more quickly, by alcohol than men's.

3. On days that you do drink, don't drink more than one to two drinks a day, and no more than nine drinks a week.

This might not seem like very much, but remember: alcohol has more effect on women's bodies than on men's.

How alcohol affects your feelings

Alcohol affects how you think and feel. Small amounts of alcohol might make you feel happy, relaxed and self-confident. But drinking too much can make you feel sad, upset or angry.

Or small amounts of alcohol might dull painful feelings. But drinking won't change the problems behind those feelings. It can even make problems worse.

Alcohol and stress in women's lives

Some women are unhappy with certain parts of their lives, but aren't able to change them. They may want children but not have any, or not want children but have them. They may want a paid job but not have one, or not like the job they're in. They may want a relationship, but not be in one, or not be happy with the relationship they are in. Some women drink or use other drugs to try to cope with the stress they feel as a result of being unhappy. Some of these women develop problems.

And some women have extra stresses in their lives. You may be more likely to use alcohol to cope if:

- you have ever been sexually, physically or emotionally assaulted or abused

- you have a partner, parent or child who drinks heavily or uses other drugs
- you, or someone you care for, has a physical or mental health problem
- you have an important loss in your life (someone close to you dies, a relationship ends, you move, you retire from or lose a job, your children leave home)
- you are living on the street
- you have experienced discrimination because you are an Aboriginal woman
- you have experienced discrimination because you are a lesbian or a bisexual woman.

Some situations can make you feel out of control. So you might start drinking to cope. But drinking won't solve your problems. It may make them worse. If you already drink regularly, drinking more to cope with stress can even cause new problems, with money, health or relationships. Too much drinking can make you feel depressed and helpless to change difficult situations.

*Try to take care of yourself, even if sometimes you don't feel like it. Ask for help when you need it.
You're important!*

Other people's drinking

How other people drink can affect you too. You are more likely to drink or take other drugs if your parents, partner or friends do.

PARENTS WHO DRINK HEAVILY OR USE OTHER DRUGS

Children often learn about alcohol and other drugs by watching their parents. Children whose parents drink heavily or use other drugs often have problems, even after they grow up.

A PARTNER OR HUSBAND WHO DRINKS HEAVILY OR USES OTHER DRUGS

You might try to hide your partner's behaviour. So you end up with all the responsibilities. Or you try to control his or her drinking, so you drink more to leave less alcohol for your partner. Or you drink to keep him or her company.

AN ABUSIVE PARTNER OR HUSBAND

Abuse can take place without alcohol and other drugs. But it often happens when a partner or husband drinks heavily or uses other drugs. And the violence may be worse when he or she is drinking or using. If you drink too, that can make it harder for you to recognize the abuse. It can also make it harder to protect yourself in an abusive situation.

Women and drinking problems

You might find that you're drinking more, or more often, than the guidelines for safer drinking mentioned earlier. Or you may "binge"—drink a lot sometimes, and only a little or not at all in between those times. Either can cause problems,

for you and for those around you. You may find that you can't get along without alcohol, that you are dependent on it. It's easy to become dependent on alcohol without even knowing it.

It can be difficult to admit to yourself and others that you have a problem. Many people don't understand the reasons why women have drinking problems. People often judge women with drinking problems more harshly than men. Some people don't want to admit that a woman they know has a drinking problem. Sometimes they want her to keep the problem hidden. So these women often don't get the support they need.

*But remember: any woman can have
a problem with alcohol.*

Don't let other people's attitudes get in your way. You may feel afraid or embarrassed, but don't let that stop you from getting the help you need. You are not alone. You deserve help. You're worth it!

Looking for help

There are places to go for support if your drinking is causing you problems. It's never too early or too late to get help. Many women have had drinking problems, and they have found the help they need. You can do it, too! Talk to someone you trust.

Contact the following organizations:

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

33 Russell Street, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2S1

1 800 463-6273

www.camh.net

(or check the white pages for your local CAMH office)

The Ontario Drug and Alcohol Registry of Treatment (DART)

1 800 565-8603

www.dart.on.ca

AWARE (Action on Women's Addictions – Research & Education)

P.O. Box 86, Kingston, Ontario K7L 4V6

1 613 545-0117

www.aware.on.ca

Or check the Yellow Pages of your phone book under “A” for addictions. Sometimes you can talk with a female counsellor, if you're more comfortable with a woman.

There are also mutual-help groups in many communities. These include Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Women for Sobriety (WFS).

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health has a self-help book called *DrinkWise*. You can use this book on your own at home to quit or cut down on your drinking. Call 1 800 661-1111 to find out how to order the book.

For more information on addiction and mental health issues, or a copy of this booklet, please contact CAMH's R. Samuel McLaughlin Information Centre:

Ontario toll-free: 1 800 463-6273

Toronto: 416 595-6111

To order multiple copies of this booklet, or other CAMH publications, please contact:

Publication Services

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