

## Women and 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<sup>1</sup>. In most social contexts, drinking is strongly coded as a male behaviour, so that when women are seen drinking, especially to excess, there is stronger social condemnation<sup>2</sup>.

### Sex Differences

Women come in different shapes and sizes, have different hormone and fat distributions, and as a result have different physical responses to drugs including alcohol. Women's bodies are 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 less total body water<sup>3</sup>. Alcohol concentrates in body water, so women's alcohol concentrations are higher for the same intake
- a smaller liver, so they are more susceptible to liver damage, i.e. cirrhosis<sup>4</sup>
- a less active stomach enzyme (ADH) which breaks down alcohol<sup>5</sup>.

Because of these differences, women are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol<sup>5</sup>

In addition:

- Hormone concentrations affect metabolism, and therefore, women's menstrual cycles may affect the metabolism and absorption of alcohol<sup>6</sup>.
- Alcohol consumption during pregnancy may cause complications, as alcohol crosses the placenta and can harm the developing foetus<sup>7</sup>.

### 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<sup>8</sup>.
- 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<sup>9</sup>.
- Women often take on the care of the drinking family member, and/or of their children<sup>10</sup>.
- 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<sup>10</sup>.
- Indigenous women are less likely to drink than non-Indigenous women, but those who do drink do so at riskier levels<sup>11</sup>.
- When intoxicated women are:
  - more likely than when sober to have unprotected sex with risk of sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy<sup>12</sup>
  - at increased risk of violence and sexual assault<sup>13</sup>.

### 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<sup>10</sup>
- 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 oral contraceptive pill and hormone therapy<sup>14</sup>.

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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<sup>1</sup> Norton R (1983) *Changing Patterns of Alcohol Consumption of Australian Women*.

<sup>2</sup> Broom D & Stevens A. *Doubly Deviant: Women Using Alcohol and Other Drugs*. Women's Studies Program, Australian National University. [www.drugtext.org/library/articles/912409.htm](http://www.drugtext.org/library/articles/912409.htm) Accessed on 1/06/2006.

<sup>3</sup> National Health and Medical Research Council (2001). *Australian Alcohol Guidelines: Health Risks and Benefits*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. *Alcohol and Women's Health: Australian Alcohol Guidelines Fact Sheet*. [http://www.alcohol.gov.au/guidelines/pdf/womenshealth\\_fs.pdf](http://www.alcohol.gov.au/guidelines/pdf/womenshealth_fs.pdf) Accessed on 24/05/2006.

<sup>5</sup> Baraona E, Abittan CS, Dohnem K, Moretti M, Pozzato G, Chayes ZW, Schaefer C & Lieber CS (2001) Gender Differences in Pharmacokinetics of Alcohol. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 25(4): 502-507.

<sup>6</sup> Northern Rivers Division of General Practice. *Women & Alcohol*. <http://www.nrdgp.org.au/directory/documents/23/Women&Alcohol.pdf> Accessed on 5/06/2006.

<sup>7</sup> O'Leary C for the National Expert Advisory Committee on Alcohol (2002) *Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: A Literature Review*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>8</sup> Smith A, Agius P, Dyson S, Mitchell A & Pitts M (2003) *Secondary Students and Sexual Health: Results of the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/AIDS and Sexual Health*. Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

<sup>9</sup> Room R. (1996). Gender roles and interactions in drinking and drug use. *Journal of Substance Abuse*, 8: 227-239.

<sup>10</sup> Donath S (2004). Women and Drugs in *Drug Use in Australia: Preventing Harm*, Hamilton M, King T & Ritter A (Eds). Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (1999) *National Health Survey 1995: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Results*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Drug Foundation (2002) *Fact Sheet for Young People, Number 1.10: The Facts About Binge Drinking*. [http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/article.asp?ContentID=the\\_facts\\_about\\_binge\\_drinking](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/article.asp?ContentID=the_facts_about_binge_drinking) Accessed on 5/06/2006.

<sup>13</sup> Parks K A, Miller B A, Collins R L, Zetes-Zanatta L. (1998) Women's Descriptions of Drinking in Bars: Reasons and Risks. *Sex Roles*; 38(9): 701-717.

<sup>14</sup> Community Alcohol Action Network for the Australian Drug Foundation. *Alcohol: the Facts*. [http://www.caan.adf.org.au/alcohol\\_facts/](http://www.caan.adf.org.au/alcohol_facts/) Accessed on 1/06/2006.