

Women and Alcohol

Alcohol affects women very differently than it does men, even after drinking the same amount. Women are usually smaller than men, so they feel the effects of alcohol sooner and stronger than men

- ▶ Women have less of a certain enzyme in their stomachs, so more alcohol gets into their bloodstream. The more alcohol in one's bloodstream, the greater the impact of the alcohol on one's thinking and behavior.
- ▶ Because women have a lower percentage of water in their bodies, the alcohol is more concentrated.
- ▶ The effect alcohol has on a woman can vary depending on her menstrual cycle. When a woman is premenstrual or ovulating, the estrogen levels in her body are higher. Higher estrogen levels cause the body to metabolize alcohol more slowly. Therefore, the concentration of alcohol in the blood is higher and continues for a longer period of time.

Women may develop alcohol-related problems after consuming less alcohol than men do and over a shorter period of time. Women alcoholics are twice as likely to die of alcohol-related diseases than men alcoholics.

- ▶ Liver Damage. Compared with men, women develop alcohol-induced liver disease over a shorter period of time and after drinking less alcohol. Women are more likely to develop alcoholic hepatitis and to die from cirrhosis. Research suggests this may be linked to the hormone estrogen.
- ▶ Breast Cancer. Some studies show that moderate to heavy drinking increases the risk for breast cancer.
- ▶ Brain Damage. Alcoholic women may be more likely than men to get alcohol-related brain damage.
- ▶ Traffic Crashes. Women have a higher risk of dying after driving drunk than men do, even when they have similar percentages of alcohol in their blood. Studies suggest that there may be differences in how alcohol affects men's and women's ability to perform driving tasks.

Alcohol and Pregnancy

Women who drink during pregnancy may give birth to babies with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Fetal Alcohol Effects, a pattern of birth defects that can include mental retardation, growth deficiencies, and joint defects. Doctors do not know the exact amount of alcohol needed to cause these problems. It is recommended that women do not drink alcohol during pregnancy.

Could you have a problem?

Often, doctors overlook signs of alcohol abuse in women because the symptoms in women (depression, anxiety, low self-esteem) are more subtle than men's symptoms of alcohol abuse.

This information is general. If your doctor tells you something different, follow his or her instructions.

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For more information about women's health issues, stop by our Resource Center at 2000 West First Street, Piedmont Plaza II, 1st Floor, Winston Salem, NC 27104, visit our website at <http://www.wakehealth.edu/WHCOE/> or contact us at (336) 713-4220.