



Women and Alcohol

Research shows that drinking, binge drinking, and extreme binge drinking by women are all increasing. While alcohol misuse by anyone presents serious public health concerns, women who drink have a higher risk of certain alcohol-related problems compared to men. Women should be aware of these health risks and make informed decisions about alcohol use.

Why Do Women Face Higher Risks?

Studies show that women start to have alcohol-related problems sooner and at lower drinking levels than men and for multiple reasons. On average, women weigh less than men. Also, alcohol resides predominantly in body water, and pound for pound, women have less water in their bodies than men. This means that after a woman and a man of the same weight drink the same amount of alcohol, the woman's blood alcohol concentration (BAC, the amount of alcohol in the blood) will tend to be higher, putting her at greater risk for harm. Other biological differences may contribute as well.

What Are the Long-Term Health Risks?

Alcohol Use Disorder

Alcohol use disorder (AUD) is a chronic relapsing brain disease characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational, or health consequences. AUD can range from mild to severe,¹ and recovery is possible regardless of severity.

¹ To be diagnosed with AUD, a person must meet certain diagnostic criteria outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition. (See <https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/dsmfactsheet/DSMfact.pdf>)



How Much Is Too Much?

In the United States, a standard drink is one that contains about 14 grams (0.6 fluid ounces) of "pure" alcohol, which is found in:

- » 12 ounces of beer with about 5 percent alcohol content
- » 5 ounces of wine with about 12 percent alcohol content
- » 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits with about 40 percent alcohol content

The percent of pure alcohol varies within and across beverage types. Although the standard drink amounts are helpful for following health guidelines, they may not reflect customary serving sizes. A large cup of beer, an overpoured glass of wine, or a single mixed drink could contain much more alcohol than a standard drink.

According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are intended to help individuals improve and maintain overall health and reduce the risk of many chronic diseases, moderate alcohol consumption is up to one drink per day for women and up to two drinks per day for men.

Snapshot: Alcohol Use by Women in the United States

	Women	Men
Drank alcohol in the past month	51.1%	61.3%
Engaged in binge drinking in the past month	22.0%	32.1%
Engaged in heavy alcohol use in the past month	4.5%	9.8%
Had alcohol use disorder (AUD) in the past year	4.2%	8.4%
Had AUD and received any treatment in the past year	5.4%	7.4%
Pregnant and used alcohol in the past month	9.3%	

Percentages represent U.S. adults aged 18 years and older who used alcohol or had AUD, with the exception of “pregnant and used alcohol in the past month,” which represents females aged 15–44.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2015.

Liver Damage

Women who regularly misuse alcohol are more likely to develop alcoholic hepatitis, a serious acute illness, than men who drink the same amount of alcohol. This pattern of drinking can also lead to cirrhosis (liver scarring and shrinkage).

Heart Disease

Long-term alcohol misuse is a leading cause of heart disease. Women are more susceptible to alcohol-related heart disease than men, even though they may consume less alcohol over their lifetime than men.

Brain Damage

Research suggests that alcohol misuse produces brain damage more quickly in women than in men. In addition, because alcohol can disrupt the development of the brain during the adolescent years, teen girls who drink may be more vulnerable to brain damage than teen boys who drink. Women also may be more susceptible than men to alcohol-related blackouts, defined as periods of memory loss of events during intoxication without loss of consciousness.

Breast Cancer

There is an association between drinking alcohol and developing breast cancer. Studies demonstrate that women who consume about one drink per day have a 5–9 percent higher chance of developing breast cancer than women who do not drink at all. That risk increases for every additional drink they have per day.

Pregnancy

Any drinking during pregnancy can be harmful. A woman who drinks during pregnancy puts her fetus at risk for physical, cognitive, or behavioral problems. (See <https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/FASDFactsheet/FASDfact.htm> for more information on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.) Drinking during pregnancy can also increase the risk for preterm labor.

Some women should avoid alcohol entirely, including:

- » Anyone who is pregnant or trying to conceive
- » Anyone younger than age 21
- » Anyone who takes medications that can interact negatively with alcohol

At-Risk Drinking

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) defines how much drinking can put a person at risk for developing AUD.

Low-risk drinking limits for developing AUD are:

- » Women: No more than 3 drinks on any single day and no more than 7 drinks per week
- » Men: No more than 4 drinks on any single day and no more than 14 drinks per week

Drinking more than the single day or weekly low-risk limits shown here is considered at-risk drinking.

People who regularly exceed the low-risk drinking limits include those who engage in binge drinking and heavy alcohol use. NIAAA defines binge drinking as a pattern of drinking that brings BAC levels to 0.08 g/dL (0.08 percent) or higher. This typically occurs after 4 drinks for women and 5 drinks for men—in about 2 hours. Binge drinking and heavy alcohol use (binge drinking five or more times a month) increase the likelihood of developing AUD, as well as experiencing alcohol-related injuries and other harms.

To see if your pattern of alcohol use puts you at risk for AUD, please visit Rethinking Drinking at <https://www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov>



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Updated June 2017