Women Drinking More to Cope, Alarming Researchers

Even lower levels of alcohol use by women puts them at a greater risk for several severe illnesses.

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Once indulged in mostly by men, alcohol has become increasingly popular among women. In fact, a 2019 survey found that females in their teens and 20s imbibed more often than their male peers, according to NPR.

However, the phenomenon is not exactly a win for gender equality. Not only does a spike in the amount and frequency of alcohol consumption increase the risk for several diseases, the habit can cause as well as exacerbate mental health problems.

Consequently, such research findings concern experts like Dawn Sugarman, PhD, a research psychologist at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, who has studied addiction in women extensively. “It’s not only that we’re seeing women drinking more but that they’re really being affected by this physically and mental health–wise,” Sugarman told NPR.

Some of these effects include an increased risk for a number of cancers. While not as carcinogenic as smoking and other forms of tobacco use, drinking is a known risk factor for breast cancer, liver cancer, colorectal cancer, esophageal cancer and head and neck cancer and a host of other medical conditions, such as heart disease and liver disease.

In addition, drinking affects men and women differently. Women appear to experience the negative physical and psychological effects of alcohol consumption more easily and rapidly than men, according to NPR. Between 2006 and 2014, alcohol-related trips to the emergency room increased by 70% among women compared with 58% among men. Also, findings show that between 2009 and 2015, the incidence of alcohol-related cirrhosis increased by 50% among women compared with 30% among men.

These gender disparities may be a result of differences in body composition. Women, whose bodies typically contain less water than men, are unable to efficiently metabolize alcohol. When females ingest booze, more of their tissues are exposed to these intoxicants.

Sugarman put it more succinctly: “From less years of alcohol use, women are getting sicker

faster."

The reasons women are drinking more have researchers worried as well. According to NPR, studies show that women, who experience child abuse and sexual assault at disproportionately increased rates, are more likely than men to drink as a way to cope rather than for pleasure. Additionally, drinking can compound existing mental health problems as well as engender new ones, creating a vicious cycle.

"For us to address issues with alcohol, we also need to address these pervasive issues with mental health," Aaron White, PhD, the senior scientific adviser to the director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, told NPR. "They are all related."

Data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that alcohol use is increasingly common among both women and girls. In recent years, approximately 13% of women and 15% of female high school students reported binge drinking, which the National Cancer Institute defines as consuming four or more alcoholic drinks in a single sitting. (For men, the guidelines state that binge drinking entails tossing back five or more alcoholic beverages in a single sitting.)

For more on the link between drinking and cancer, read "Alcohol Consumption Linked to Cancer Incidence and Mortality in All States." And for the American Cancer Society's latest recommendations for alcohol consumption, read "Alcohol and Cancer: What The New Guidelines Mean."

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