

Important information for women drinkers



Why alcohol has a different effect on women than on men.

Women are more sensitive...

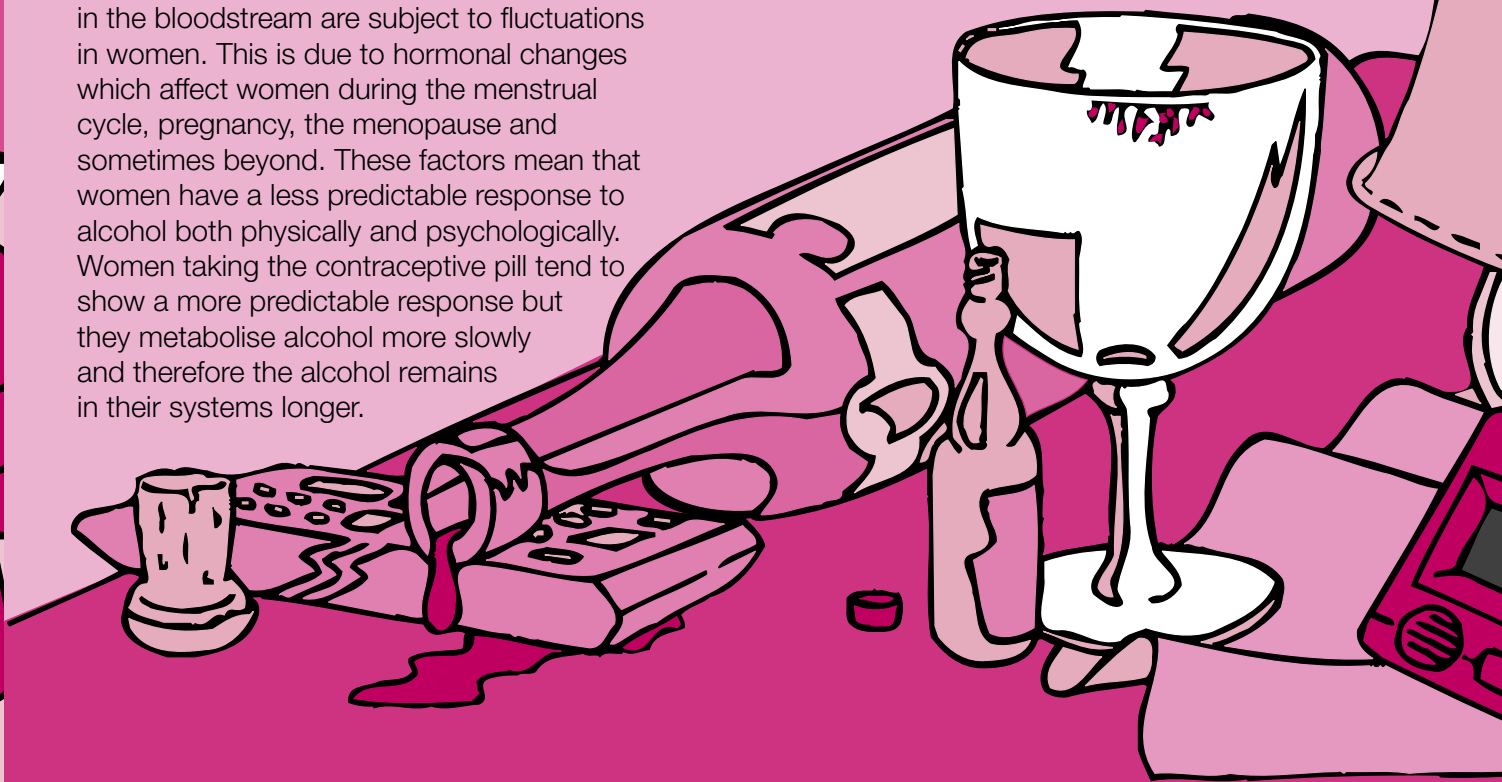
Women's bodies are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol than are men's. There are several reasons for this: firstly, the average man's body mass is approximately 12% greater than the average woman's; secondly, women's bodies contain a lower proportion of water than men's bodies and alcohol dissolves more easily in the watery body fluids. Both these factors mean that if the average man and the average woman drink the same amount of alcohol, the concentration of alcohol in the woman's body will be greater. Also the digestive enzymes women produce are less efficient in processing alcohol than are those produced by men.

Women are less predictable...

The body's responses to the amount of alcohol in the bloodstream are subject to fluctuations in women. This is due to hormonal changes which affect women during the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, the menopause and sometimes beyond. These factors mean that women have a less predictable response to alcohol both physically and psychologically. Women taking the contraceptive pill tend to show a more predictable response but they metabolise alcohol more slowly and therefore the alcohol remains in their systems longer.

Women drink differently...

Women's drinking patterns tend to differ too. Usually drinking begins as a social activity for both men and women. People go out for a drink to celebrate and enjoy the company of friends. Men who develop problems tend to continue drinking in public with bar-room acquaintances but the amount and frequency creeps up. Women who develop problems tend to start drinking to self-medicate for stress, tension, anxiety, depression or loneliness and they drink at home; partly because this is where they spend more time and partly probably because it is still perceived to be less socially acceptable for women to drink on their own in public. Women still tend to feel shame if their drinking gets out of hand whereas for men heavy drinking is often regarded a sign of toughness and machismo.



Women risk more medical problems...

Women tend to have a much shorter drinking career than men before the onset of serious medical problems. The average woman consuming 70 units of alcohol per week (say 8–9 bottles of wine per week) might expect to become physically dependent after only two to three years. Some women show dependency symptoms after consistent drinking of only half this amount.

Women are more likely to incur liver damage too. At an average consumption of five units per day (roughly 3/4 bottle wine or two and a half pints ordinary strength beer) a woman might expect to develop liver cirrhosis after about 13 years. The average time-span for men is 22 years.

It still more common for women to be prescribed tranquillisers or sleeping tablets (benzodiazepines) than men. These drugs, when combined with alcohol, can increase vulnerability to dependence and psychological problems.

There is some evidence to suggest that post-menopausal women taking Hormone Replacement Therapy may be at increased risk of developing breast cancer if they drink alcohol.

Our advice to pregnant women is to drink as close to nothing as you can manage.

Women are more sensible ...

Historically, women's use of alcohol has always been more moderate and sensible than has men's. Today about 28% of men regularly drink above sensible limits (21 units per week). For women the figure is 13% even though the limits are much lower for women (14 units per week). Fewer women sustain liver damage, fewer women are convicted of drink driving, fewer women are involved in alcohol-related crime.

However we should guard against complacency. There is a lot of pressure from advertising, from male friends or partners, relatives and work colleagues for women to drink more. Drinking "to keep up with the boys" may prove a false liberation. Real freedom lies surely in informed individual choice, not in emulating some other group of drinkers.

apas

If you have any questions about the contents of this leaflet or you fear that you or a friend of yours may have an alcohol-related problem please telephone :

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