

## *Binge Drinking & Women's Health*

In Australia, alcohol is the most widely accepted drug, despite being responsible for the most teenage drug-related deaths. Alcohol is the most commonly used and abused drug in Australia, with the worst cases of alcohol abuse seen within the age group 14-24 years.

What is binge drinking?

Binge drinking is also commonly referred to as 'heavy drinking', 'problem drinking' and 'risky drinking' and describes excessive alcohol intake in a short period of time or continuous drinking for an extended period of time. People who engage in binge drinking usually have the primary intention of becoming intoxicated. The number of standard drinks consumed to quantify a binge drinking episode is difficult to quantify however the Australian Medical Association recently defined binge drinking as four standard Australian drinks a night.

### *Short term effects*

- Intoxication and loss of social control
- Increased risk taking behaviour
- Vulnerability to unsafe or unwanted sex, verbal or physical abuse
- Injury to yourself, shakiness, memory loss
- Hangovers
- Nausea and vomiting

### *Long term effects*

- Alcohol dependence, damage to brain and liver
- Emotional problems; depression, suicide, relationship problems
- Unwanted pregnancy, STDs
- Feelings of shame and embarrassment
- Feeling vulnerable and out of control while intoxicated
- Losing contact with friends or loved ones as a result of behaviour
- Loss of valuable items
- Financial losses

### *Alcohol affects females differently*

Women are generally more affected by alcohol because they have:

1. Smaller physical size – Males tend to be larger than females and therefore their total body's water is a greater volume. This means that for the same number of standard drinks absorbed the female body will have a higher concentration of alcohol as it will be less diluted.
2. More fatty tissue – Females tend to have more fat stores than males. Fatty tissue does not take up alcohol and therefore it remains in the blood giving a higher blood alcohol concentration.
3. Smaller liver – This is the organ responsible for breaking down alcohol and clearing it from the blood. Because the female liver is smaller it cannot clear the alcohol as fast as a male liver and so females become drunk faster and stay intoxicated longer.

Alcohol consumption can cause liver damage in both males and females however females can experience damage at much lower levels of consumption. For this reason it is recommended females consume less alcohol than men.

4. Hormone levels – Some research suggests that a female's hormone levels at different stages of the menstrual cycle can affect how the alcohol is tolerated. Females on the contraceptive pill may take longer to clear alcohol from their body.

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**DRUG ARM National Office**

24 Hamilton Place, BOWEN HILLS QLD 4006. GPO Box 590 BRISBANE QLD 4001

Phone: 1300 656 800 Email: [library@drugarm.com.au](mailto:library@drugarm.com.au) Web: [www.drugarm.com.au](http://www.drugarm.com.au)

## *Binge Drinking & Women's Health...*

### *What level of alcohol is considered 'low risk'?*

To stay 'low risk' it is recommended that females have no more than 2 standard drinks per day. Though no alcohol level is considered completely safe, drinking within these guidelines is considered to be 'low risk'. The NHMRC also recommends young woman and men aged 15-17 should delay the initiation to drinking for as long as possible.

### *Sexual Consequences*

Binge drinking may lead to risk taking behaviour and an inability to make the right choices regarding sexual activity. The consequences may include:

- Exposure to sexually transmitted diseases
- Emotional distress and regret
- Unsafe sexual practice
- Unwanted pregnancy

### *Nutritional Consequences*

Binge drinking causes nutritional problems such as

- weight gain
- nutritional imbalance
- vitamin and mineral deficiencies

Alcohol can cause the skin to become dehydrated and can lead to premature ageing effects such as wrinkles, skin sagging and blotchy/reddened skin

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For more information on these and other topics contact:

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