Women and Substance Abuse

Stigma, stereotyping, inadequate screening, and under reporting, make the prevalence of women addicted to alcohol or other drugs difficult to assess. A national survey found that about 18% of all women have had an alcohol or drug problem (abuse or dependence) in their lives. The highest rates are typically among younger women between the ages of 21 and 34. However, older women may have hidden problems: a report from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found that 25.6 million American women over the age of 60 abuse substances such as alcohol, psychoactive prescription drugs, and cigarettes, resulting in $30 billion in health care expenses.

What Does the Research Show?

Substance abuse produces different physiological, psychological, and social problems in women than it does in men.

**Physiological factors:** heavy drinking among women is associated with increased rates of breast cancer. Women are often more susceptible to alcohol-related medical disorders than men. For example, alcoholic women develop cirrhosis, cardiomyopathy, and brain impairment at the same rate, or sooner than, their male counterparts despite lower lifetime levels of alcohol consumption.

This accelerated development of physical problems is consistent with other research that shows that, overall, the course of the disease of alcoholism seems to develop somewhat more rapidly among women than men, though the progression of symptoms is quite similar. This phenomenon is known as a “telescoping effect,” where the time from first heavy drinking to first treatment, or other indicator of major problems, is shortened. Why do women have unique health risks associated with heavy alcohol use? Women may have reduced levels of the gastric enzyme that metabolizes alcohol, resulting in proportionately higher blood alcohol concentrations. In addition, alcohol may increase estrogen-related hormones, such as estradiol. Complicating matters, these two systems may be inter-related, creating synergistic effects.

Women who are pregnant and use substances face additional problems. Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is a serious teratogenic substance-related problem, and is one of the leading causes of mental retardation.

**Psychological factors:** women with alcohol and other drug problems generally have a more complex mental health picture than do men. Common psychological problems among women in treatment include depression, anxiety, eating disorders, borderline personality disorder, suicide attempts, post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD), and histories of physical and/or sexual abuse. Rates of these disorders are at least twice as high among alcohol/addicted women as women from the general populations.

Despite the presence of these disorders, women's treatment outcomes are generally comparable or better than men's. It may be that the psychopathology is greater, but the severity of the substance abuse less, or it may be that women more readily engage in the treatment process.

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**Social factors:** women with alcohol and other drug use problems battle ingrained stigma and stereotyping from society at large. The resulting stigma serves to victimize substance abusing women and becomes a treatment barrier. Screening instruments may miss some of the unique features of women’s early developing alcohol and drug problems, such as unsafe sexual behavior, breakdown in child care routines, and neglect of personal appearance.

Many women may seek help at mental health or medical clinics, or are placed in correction settings, where alcohol or other drug problems may be missed. Women are often in relationships with substance-dependent men. In fact, one study found that women who were heavy users of alcohol, cocaine, or marijuana were twice as likely as other women to marry men with drinking problems.

**How to Use This Information**

- Recognize the early signs of women’s problem use of substances: the progression of substance abuse occurs more quickly than in men. Do not assess a woman’s alcohol or other drug use severity based on typical male levels of frequency or quantity of consumption.
- Refer women to treatment whenever possible: women engage themselves in treatment and generally therefore respond well and experience positive treatment outcomes.
- Substance abuse is often missed in women who are in mental health, healthcare, and corrections systems. Look closely at substance use history when dealing with women in these environments and make sure that treatment tailored to fit their needs is available to them.
- Women often receive less support for seeking help than do men. As a result, women often have more complex presenting problems. Psychological and medical assessments should be done to adequately evaluate female clients.

**References**


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The Butler Center for Research informs and improves recovery services and produces research that benefits the field of addiction treatment. We are dedicated to conducting clinical research, collaborating with external researchers, and communicating scientific findings.

Patricia Owen, Ph.D., Director

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