

Women especially vulnerable to alcohol risks

Everyone – whether young, middle-aged, or elderly; single, married, divorced, or living with someone; religious or not; living in the country, city or suburbs; earning a lot or a little; from any ethnic background; and living any type of lifestyle – is affected by alcohol, tobacco and other drugs in our society.

Women are at especially high risk for the health and social problems caused by alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

For example,

- Lung cancer rates among women increased over sixfold between 1950 and 1990.

- Sixty percent of college women who acquired a sexually transmitted disease such as AIDS or genital herpes were under the influence of alcohol at the time they had intercourse.

- Women become more intoxicated than men when drinking identical doses of alcohol. That's because women have less water in their bodies than men, so the alcohol is less diluted and has a greater impact.

- Women do not metabolize alcohol as efficiently as men do, which may make women more vulnerable to the consequences of drinking.

- Women are likely to combine their alcohol dependence with drug abuse, particularly the abuse of prescription drugs.

- Late-stage complications of alcoholism in women, such as liver damage, hypertension, anemia and malnutrition, develop with shorter drinking history and at lower levels of alcohol intake than men.

- Menstrual disorders have been associated with chronic heavy drinking. These

disorders can cause fertility problems.

- Babies whose mothers drink during pregnancy, especially those who drink heavily, may be born with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

FAS is one of the leading known causes of mental retardation. Babies born with FAS weigh less and are shorter than normal. They have smaller heads, malformed facial features, abnormal joints and limbs, and poor coordination. Problems with learning, attention, memory and problem solving are common. Some babies also have speech and hearing impairments and heart defects. Many of these problems persist into adulthood.

Since there is no known safe level of alcohol, the best bet is to avoid drinking altogether if you are pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant.