
Column: Why Some Women May Need to Rethink Their Relationship with Alcohol

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Opinion

If you've ever enjoyed a glass of wine to unwind after a long day or shared cocktails with friends, you're not alone. But here's something you might not know: alcohol affects women differently than men—and not in a good way.

Women's bodies process alcohol differently, making them more susceptible to its harmful effects. And in recent years, alcohol-related health risks for women have skyrocketed. The former U.S. surgeon general recently warned that alcohol increases cancer risk, while studies show that alcohol-related deaths among women have jumped by nearly 15% in the past two decades.

Did you know that...

- Nearly 29% of women aged 18-25 report binge drinking? Binge drinking during these formative years can cause long-term changes to brain development and increase the risk of developing alcohol dependence.
- Despite common myths, no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy? Even small amounts may increase the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Despite these risks, nearly 14% of pregnant women report drinking and about 5% reported binge drinking.

- Heavy drinking among women has surged by 41% since the pandemic? The rise of “mommy wine” culture has made drinking feel like a normal part of parenting, putting mothers at higher risk of liver disease, heart problems, increased anxiety and depression, and developing alcohol dependence.
- As women approach perimenopause, alcohol can hit harder due to hormonal shifts, increasing the risk of conditions like heart disease and certain cancers? For African American women, alcohol can exacerbate the risk of heart problems such as hypertension and cardiomyopathy.
- The American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) recently highlighted a strong link between alcohol use and six types of cancer, including breast and colorectal cancers? This is particularly concerning, as rates for some of these cancers are rising among younger adults.
- Alcohol-related dementia happens when long-term heavy drinking causes serious brain damage, leading to memory loss, trouble solving problems, and changes in behavior and personality?
- While alcohol consumption can have negative effects on your health, the good news is that making lifestyle changes can help reduce the risk. Being mindful of alcohol is a great first step, but prioritizing your overall well-being is just as important. Here are some ways to stay on top of your health:
- Understand the impact of alcohol. Think red wine is good for your heart? New research says otherwise—no amount of alcohol is healthy. Educating yourself about alcohol’s effects can help you make more informed choices.
- Make a plan. If you choose to drink, set limits, alternate with water, or explore non-alcoholic alternatives. Consider finding social activities that don’t revolve around alcohol
- See your doctor regularly. Routine checkups can help identify early signs of alcohol-related health risks, including high blood pressure, liver issues, and increased cancer risk.
- Explore available resources. Many workplaces offer Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that provide support for mental health, stress, and substance use concerns. You may also have access to digital health tools, telehealth visits and wellness programs.
- Lean on a support system. Instead of relying on alcohol to unwind, try stress-relieving activities like walking, journaling, or connecting with a friend. Surround yourself with people who encourage balance and healthy choices.

If you’re concerned about your drinking or need guidance, reach out to a health care provider, explore behavioral health resources through your insurance, or visit the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.