

# Women and Drugs: The Risk of harm from Consuming Alcohol (and/or using other psychoactive substances)

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I had the opportunity to conduct a study among women in the metropolitan area of Perth inquiring about the nature and the scope of alcohol and other drug use in the context of possible relationship problems. The study was approved by the university ethics committee and involved 148 clients of Women's Healthworks. It was conducted in 2008 where women were asked to complete a questionnaire. They also had the opportunity to take part in an in-dept interview. Study participants represented a cross-section of Women's Healthworks service users. They seemed to use alcohol and other psychoactive substances posing an alarming health risk.

Results of the study suggest that alcohol use in particular may be problematic in terms of having a negative health impact. Nearly half the women in this study, 48% (72/148) consumed alcohol at a level posing risk of harm. Over one in five women (24%) used painkillers, and 14% used tranquillisers for non-medical purposes. A minority, (13%) reported being current smokers, with 5% indicating being heavy or chain smokers. Around 10% of study participants engaged in illicit substance use (11% marijuana; 10% Meth/amphetamines; 9% Ecstasy and 0.1% Heroin). It was found that often study participants use more than one drug concurrently. For example, while the study found that cigarette smoking did not seem to be a big issue, of the women being current smokers 79% (15/19), also reported to drink alcohol at a harmful level.

The women accessing our services come for a variety of reasons such as appointments for medical consultations or participating in a walking group. They are concerned with their health and wellbeing, but at the same time may engage in health risk behaviours. Findings of this study show that harmful alcohol use is a concerning issue among our clients warranting further attention. We want to assist women in the general community and help them improve their overall health and support efforts that prevent (or at least reduce) risk of drug-related harm.

The study also found that many women suffer from abuse and/or violence at the hands of a current or former partner. Often, this exposure to abuse and/or violence is compounded by battling mental health problems such as anxiety and/or depression. In fact, the research showed that 55% of clients (82/148) showed symptoms of anxiety, and 21% (31/148) showed symptoms of depression. Four-teen percent of participants (20/148) scored on both scales, indicating diagnosable symptoms of anxiety as well depression at the same time.

Women, while being connected to Women's Healthworks, suffer in silence as their problems do not always come to our attention. The results of this study are surprising and alarming. We, as a responsible women's health service, want to assist all women in the Northern Suburbs of Perth to improve overall health and wellbeing as well as reduce drug-related harm.

If you are affected or just want to read more, please read the continuation of this article where you also find helpful web links. **Women and Drugs should not a taboo topic any longer.**

## Continuation of article **Women and Drugs: The Risk of harm from Consuming Alcohol (and/or using other psychoactive substances)**

The adverse health effects of drinking alcohol (and using other drugs) are well known. Women, as a specific subgroup of the population, are at risk of harm not only from alcohol use but from life stresses exacerbating the likelihood to engage in drinking behaviour (see article in the DrugInfo Newsletter (June 2009, Volume 7, Number 4) available at:

[http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/newsletter.asp?ContentID=alcohol\\_and\\_other\\_drug\\_use\\_and\\_gender](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/newsletter.asp?ContentID=alcohol_and_other_drug_use_and_gender)).

The National Health and Medical Research Council in Australia (2009) revised its 2001 guidelines on alcohol consumption, *further reducing suggested levels of 'low risk'*. Research demonstrates that the more alcohol is consumed the greater the risk of harm, regardless of gender. However, **the updated guidelines specifically draw attention to women in terms of pregnancy and breastfeeding.**

The current guidelines suggest:

- **There is no safe level of consuming alcohol (or other drugs)** – While alcohol is by far the most widely used psychoactive substance classified as drug in Australia, many do not perceive it to be a drug. It is important to realise that alcohol is a drug (even if legally available), which can cause injury, illness, violence, and even death.
- **The risk of harm increases more quickly for women than for men** – “Heavy drinking is much more risky for women than it is for men” (US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2008, p. 2). Women consuming alcohol in a hazardous way are at a greater risk of being victimised by violence (e.g. making them more vulnerable to sexual abuse).
- **Self-medication is not the solution** - Using alcohol (and/or other drugs) to cope with stressful life situations can make things worse. It is known that “women who have trouble with their closest relationships tend to drink more than other women” (US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2008, p. 10). While the use of alcohol (and/or other drugs) may be perceived as beneficial (e.g. as a positive reinforcer – to help you ‘get through the day’, or ‘finding sleep’; or as a negative reinforcer – to reduce feelings of anxiety) in the short term, mental health problems and increased risk of self-harm or engaging in violence are associated with self-medicating behaviours.
- **No alcohol if pregnant or breastfeeding (for the sake of the child)** - A recent Western Australian study conducted by the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research found that 59% of pregnant women continue to drink (Colvin, Payne, Parsons, Kurinczuk, & Bower, 2007), which is concerning. Consideration should be given to the baby, as drinking alcohol increases the risk of a number of health consequences for the (unborn) child. Not only can pregnancy be affected by miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight and increased vulnerability to illness, slow growth and delayed development, and stillbirth, but pregnant women consuming alcohol (and/or other drugs) are more likely to have poor nutrition intake, which affects the baby negatively.

**Children born to women consuming alcohol during pregnancy are more likely to develop Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)** – which include a range of issues considering child development, behaviours, and learning difficulties.

**Children born to women consuming alcohol excessively and regularly are more likely to develop Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)** – which can be seen on abnormal facial features and significant intellectual impairment intellectually as well as in physical development problems.

These are guidelines provided by the National Health and Medical Research Council in Australia (2009). If you would like to obtain further information on alcohol and other drugs, you may find the following websites helpful:

[www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

Australian Drug Foundation, Melbourne (information brochures and posters free of charge)

[www.health.gov.au/lifescrpts](http://www.health.gov.au/lifescrpts)

The Lifescrpts project (national initiative to promote risk factor management in health care services)

[www.nceta.flinders.edu.au](http://www.nceta.flinders.edu.au)

The National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA)

[www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/alcoholandpregnancy](http://www.ichr.uwa.edu.au/alcoholandpregnancy)

The Alcohol and Pregnancy Project (Institute of Child Health Research at UWA)

## References

Colvin, L., Payne, J., Parsons, D., Kurinczuk, J. & Bower, C. (2007). Alcohol Consumption During Pregnancy in Non-Indigenous West Australian Women. *Alcohol Clinical Experimental Research*, 31(2), 276-284.

National Health and Medical Research Council. (2009). *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol*. Canberra, ACT, Commonwealth of Australia.

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (2008). *Alcohol: A Women's Health Issue*. Bethesda, MD: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

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