



# Center for Behavioral Health Studies

## Alcohol — An Important Women's Health Issue

**W**hile it's true that men are more likely to drink alcohol in greater amounts, women have a much higher risk of developing problems from alcohol use.

### Metabolic Variables

**W**hen a woman drinks, the alcohol in her bloodstream typically reaches a higher level than a man's. This is true even if both are drinking the same amount, because women's bodies generally have less water than men's bodies.

Since alcohol mixes with body water, a given amount of alcohol is less diluted in a woman's body than in a man's. **Women become more impaired by alcohol's effects and are more susceptible to alcohol related organ damage.** This results in developing damage at lower levels of alcohol consumption over a shorter period of time.

Currently, about one-third of American women report regular alcohol consumption and 2.3 percent, or 2.5 million women, meet the criteria for alcohol dependence.

### Adolescence — Setting the Stage

**R**esults from national surveys show that alcohol use is prevalent among both female adolescents and young adults. And while heavy drinking remains more common among young men, **the number of young women who are now drinking greater amounts is alarmingly high.**

Adolescence is a critical stage of development. Rapidly changing body systems during this period are especially vulnerable to alcohol's effects.

*"The younger a woman is when she begins drinking, the more likely she is to develop a problem with alcohol later in life."* -- Mona L. Sumner, Chief Operations Officer, Rimrock Foundation



Adolescence is a time of dramatic changes in hormone levels and patterns of behavior. Gender differences in the body's hormonal response to stress also begin to emerge. Some girls may be at particular risk for emotional difficulties, depression, and problems with self-image.

During early adolescence, girls can be especially vulnerable to stress. Higher levels of stress have been found to be one of the most powerful predictors of alcohol and other drug use.

### Impact on the Brain

**C**ritical physical changes occur in the brain during adolescence. The prefrontal cortex, the brain region thought to be involved in various goal directed behaviors, undergoes substantial changes.

Changes in these systems have a powerful effect on adolescent psychological functioning and behavior. As a result, some adolescents may be more likely to engage in risk taking behaviors, such as experimenting with alcohol and other drugs.

With alcohol use at an early age, the volume of the hippocampus, a brain region important for learning and memory, has been found to be significantly smaller.



**Summary**

Alcohol use can have effects on female reproductive functioning at several stages of life.

**Research suggests that growth and progression of puberty may be at risk in adolescent women who consume even moderate amounts of alcohol.**

The reproductive consequences associated with a woman's alcohol abuse and alcoholism are significant. Problems can range from infertility and increased risk for spontaneous abortion, to impaired fetal growth and development.

**Editorial Staff**

**Editor in Chief:**  
David W. Cunningham

**Assistant Editors:**  
Hugh Kilbourne  
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**Art/Graphics Designer:**  
Lenny Joyce



**Center for Behavioral  
Health Studies**

Rimrock Foundation  
P.O. Box 30374  
Billings, MT 59107

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