Women and Alcohol Use

Women More Vulnerable to Effects of Alcohol Use

According to NIAAA (Alcohol Alert No. 46, 1999), women are more susceptible to the negative consequences of alcohol abuse than their male counterparts.

Liver Damage Women develop "alcohol-induced liver disease over a shorter period of time and after consuming less alcohol" than men. Women are also more vulnerable to alcoholic hepatitis and more likely to die from cirrhosis.

Brain Damage Women may be more susceptible to alcohol-induced brain damage than men.

Breast Cancer The risk for breast cancer increases with moderate to heavy alcohol use.

Traffic Crashes Women are less likely to drink and drive and to be involved in fatal alcohol-related accidents. However, women are at greater risk for driver fatality than men with comparable blood alcohol concentrations.

Mortality and Alcohol Abuse in Women

Women who consume alcohol during pregnancy are likely to abuse alcohol and even die prematurely. Previous research has shown that a link exists between alcohol consumption in women and premature death (Smith et al., 1987). This report explores the relationship between alcohol use in pregnant women and mortality.

A study initiated at Emory University in 1979 set out to explore the effects of maternal alcohol consumption during pregnancy on children. In an initial interview the women, primarily African-American and of low SES, were asked to supply demographic information, as well as information concerning amount of alcohol consumed per week, tobacco and illicit drug use, sexual partner alcohol use, and parental and sibling alcohol use. The enrolled women and their offspring were followed until January 2000. At that time a retrospective study was undertaken to ascertain how many of the women in the study (N=583) had died since enrollment.

The Georgia State Death Archives were searched for the years 1979 to 1998. Of the 583 subjects of this study, 31 women (5%) had died. Eighteen of the 266 women who continued to drink throughout pregnancy (7%) and eight of the 113 women who discontinued drinking sometime during pregnancy (7%) died. Only five of the 198 women who did not consume any alcohol during pregnancy (2%) were deceased. All of these women died between the ages of 20 and 54 years with the average age being 36 years.

Causes of death were ascertained using death certificates obtained from the Georgia... women who consumed alcohol...died of violent causes, infectious disease (AIDS), and alcohol-related complications..."
Parents' Drinking Affects Children's Response to Alcohol Smell

According to National Institutes of Health, children of parents who "drink to escape feelings of unhappiness" are more likely to have a negative response to the smell of alcohol. Children's responses to alcohol may directly relate to emotions observed or experienced while their parents consumed alcohol.

State Vital Records Unit. There were very different causes of death for the drinkers and the nondrinkers. The nondrinkers died of cancer, complications of obesity, and one woman was murdered. However, the women who consumed alcohol at least some of the time during their pregnancy were found to have died of violent causes, infectious disease (AIDS), and alcohol-related health complications such as renal and hepatic failure.

While women who consume alcohol during pregnancy may harm their unborn children, they also harm themselves. Alcohol addiction is a disease and it crosses all socioeconomic groups. New interventions need to be developed to target women of childbearing age. Further, education needs to be targeted to adolescents before they become alcohol abusers.

Elementary-school-aged children of alcoholics "show more negative alcohol expectancies" than their classmates. Preschool children of heavy drinkers or escape drinkers are better than other preschoolers at identifying alcohol by scent.

While it is yet unknown if "early aversion" impacts later behavior, this effort provides useful information to NIAAA and its attempt to understand drinking in kids.

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The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is dedicated to the study and prevention of the effects of maternal substance abuse. Since 1978, the project has studied the development of children exposed to alcohol and other drugs prenatally and their caregivers and provided training for Prevention statewide. For additional information call (404) 712-9800.