



ALCOHOL AND HEALTH

ALCOHOL AND WOMEN



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INTRODUCTION

For some years now, the media have been reporting regularly on women's drinking habits. The trends, often gleaned randomly from social media and women's magazine websites, are disturbing.

Some research has shown that younger women are eating less in order to experience the effects of alcohol more intensely on an empty stomach, to save money so they can buy more alcohol, and above all, to avoid the extra calories.¹ Other studies have found a significant connection between drinking and weight management among young girls.² This has led to reports of a dangerous new fashion called drunkorexia—a combination of binge drinking and eating disorder.

We have also seen a great deal of media attention on young women who frequent happy hours, host well-lubricated parties, and for whom regular drinking of copious amounts of alcohol represents relaxation, freedom and bonding. A few years ago, *Elle Québec* ran an article called "30 ans, professionnelle et alcoolique" (30, Professional and Alcoholic) about the soul sisters of Carrie Bradshaw (*Sex and the City*) and the character created by Rafaële Germain in her book *Gin & Tonic and Cucumber*—characters who have come to glorify the excessive consumption of wine, cosmopolitans and G&Ts.³

Young singles who spend time in bars are not the only ones who have an ambiguous relationship with alcohol. Older women also have their issues. Take Caroline Allard, for example, whose book *Chroniques d'une mère indigne* (Chronicles of an Unworthy Mother) has been a huge success and who admits without guilt that gin and tonic is more appealing to her than things involving formula. The cover of Volume II features a cocktail with a pacifier hanging from its straw. Of course, these chronicles are intended to be humorous, but they nonetheless reflect a number of new stories with a sociological bent that have appeared in the US

in recent years, the underlying theme of which seems to be that today's mothers can't quite handle raising children without being slightly tipsy.

It all raises the question: Are these facts and stories indicative of a serious population-wide trend, or are they the product of the same old sexist biases that have always been applied to women and drinking? Is the number of women who drink too much really going up, or is it just that people are more bothered by them than they are by men who do the same? After all, let's not forget that drinking has always been characteristic of the male of the species—a privilege that men have traditionally denied women.⁴

Paralleling the media coverage are the numerous and regular research reports on the sex-specific consequences of drinking among women, with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) and breast cancer the two alcohol-related health problems most frequently noted. Other studies tell us that various alcohol-related problems are not specific to women, yet women are more vulnerable to them. Since 2012, *Éduc'alcool* has been running a campaign on low-risk drinking. In every message, the recommendations for men and women are different, with women being advised to drink less than men. The time has come to examine what the science says so we can understand exactly why men and women are so different when it comes to alcohol.

How do women drink? Why do they drink? What impact does drinking have on their health and well-being? These are among the questions we seek to answer in this *Éduc'alcool* publication intended for women of all ages... and men, too. We hope it will help everyone become better informed and make more enlightened decisions about drinking, while convincing them that moderation is always in good taste.

¹ Bryant, Darkes and Rahal, 2012; Burke et al., 2010; Osborne, Sher and Winograd, 2011

² Barry and Piazza-Gardner, 2012

³ Forget, 2009

⁴ Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004; Nolen-Hoeksema and Hilt, 2006; Wilsnack, Wilsnack and Obot, 2005

SEPARATING ANECDOTE FROM FACT

Population-based data in Quebec paint a nuanced picture of drinking among women. One survey showed that five out of six Quebec women had drunk alcohol during the previous year and nearly two thirds of them drink at least once a month.⁵ Among these regular drinkers, it would appear that a culture of taste is gradually taking hold. In fact, among all women in Quebec, 70% of drinking occasions are associated with a meal. Among men, however, that ratio is only 58%.⁶

Quebec women do not drink every day. Fourteen percent of women who drink alcohol say they do so four or more times a week. One in five (19%) drinks two or three times a week; one in seven (14%) drinks once a week and one in three (33%) drinks one to three times a month. One in every five women who drink (20%) says she does so very infrequently, i.e. less than once a month.⁷

When women's drinking habits are analyzed with regard to the low-risk drinking guidelines, the following picture emerges.⁸ The Canadian Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey showed that, in 2017, 18.5% of Quebec women 15 and older had exceeded the guidelines for limiting long-term effects, i.e. 10 drinks a week (no more than two drinks a day, no more than five days a week). This compares to 14.8% in 2013 and 12.8% in 2008. In addition, 12.7% had exceeded the guidelines for

limiting short-term effects, i.e. they had consumed more than three drinks on a single occasion (compared to 8.3% in 2013 and 7.8% in 2008). However, these results are based solely on drinking during the previous seven days. Such a brief reporting window tends to result in underestimating the real percentage of women who drink more than is recommended. For a more accurate indication, we need to look at other measurements of excessive drinking.

A whole other picture is revealed when we examine the prevalence and frequency of excessive drinking over the previous 12 months. In 2019, six out of ten women drinkers (62%) said they had consumed three or more drinks on a single occasion over the previous 12 months.⁹ Statistics Canada data for 2013 and 2017 indicate this number is on the rise. In 2013, 56.3% of Quebec women 15 and older reported having four drinks or more on a single occasion during the previous year. In 2017, that figure had risen to 59.4%. This upward trend is seen in three age groups: among women 18-24, the annual prevalence of excessive drinking rose from 75.3% to 79%; among women 25-34, it increased from 57.2% to 78.3%; and among those 65 and older, it went up from 31.2% to 41.1%. We may therefore conclude that a growing number of these women are engaging in episodes of abusive drinking.



⁵ Éduc'alcool, 2019

⁶ Paradis, Demers and Picard, 2010

⁷ Éduc'alcool, 2019

⁸ In November 2011, federal, provincial and territorial health ministers received Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (LRDG), produced by a committee of experts. According to these guidelines, in order to reduce long-term (chronic) health risks, low-risk drinking for women means no more than 10 drinks a week - a maximum of two drinks a day - with non-drinking days every week to avoid developing a habit. To reduce short-term harm, women should have no more than three drinks on a single occasion.

⁹ Éduc'alcool, 2019



The data are even more informative when the previous month or previous week is considered. In 2013, 25.3% of women 25-34 had four or more drinks on a single occasion at least once a month and 11.8% did so at least once a week. In 2017, those figures rose to 29.5% and 11.9% respectively. Among women 45-54, the percentage of those reporting one monthly incident of excessive drinking increased from 17.8% to 28.6%, while the incidence of weekly excessive drinking increased 11.4% to 13.9%.

Among women 35-44, things are trending in the opposite direction. The percentage of those who drink abusively at least once a month fell from 37.2% to 24.2%. Among those who drink abusively at least once a week, the percentage dropped from 10% to 6.6%. Among women 18-24, the percentage fell from 13% to 9.1%. Thus, from 2013 to 2017, more women 18-24 drank abusively at least once a year, but a declining number were drinking to excess on a weekly basis.

Alcohol dependence is a diagnosis applied to women with serious alcohol-related problems who require treatment. The data show that 0.9% of women in Quebec are diagnosed as alcohol dependent and 0.4% say their lives have been disrupted because of their drinking. Note that three times more men report such problems, and this male/female ratio has not changed in 30 years.¹⁰

To sum up the main points: generally speaking, four in five women drink alcohol at least occasionally. Most of these women drink infrequently, and when they do, it is with a meal. Fewer than 1% of women who drink are diagnosed as alcohol dependent. However, among young adults and women 65 and older, the prevalence of occasional excessive drinking is on the rise. It is noteworthy that, from 2013 to 2017, the frequency of excessive drinking episodes increased among women 25-34 and those 45-54.

¹⁰ Kairouz, 2008

WHY WOMEN DRINK THE WAY THEY DO

There are both biological and social reasons behind women's drinking habits.

The fact that a significant percentage of women do not drink, and that women tend to drink infrequently and moderately relates to the way women metabolize alcohol.

It is also important to remember that, in our culture, women are much more likely to be stigmatized for their drinking than men. A double standard exists, under which women and men are not judged the same way for the same behaviour: an intoxicated woman is more likely to be blamed, and her behaviour considered more abnormal. Women internalize this blame and come to agree with the negative opinions.¹¹

This social pressure to drink less may be felt even more keenly by women of reproductive age. Researchers have documented the well-established cultural belief that mothers, more than fathers, must always be on call for their children.¹² What's more, while fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) are very serious, indeed—we'll discuss the issue below—many individuals and groups have seized upon the science showing that alcohol has detrimental and irreversible effects which could be prevented by abstinence to promote what might be considered an ideal of purity, i.e. abstinence, among women of child-bearing age. Recall, for example, the private member's bill by a Member of Parliament from Ontario who sought to keep any mother-to-be from drinking a drop of alcohol, with a view to protecting her unborn child. The MP argued the importance of exerting "social pressure" on pregnant women, or those planning to become pregnant, who choose to sip a glass of beer or wine.¹³



¹¹ Bouvet de la Maisonneuve, 2010; Greenfield and Room, 1997; Knufter, 1987; Nadeau 1999; Nadeau 2000; Robbins and Martin, 1993; Vogeltanz-Holm et al., 2004; Wiltschko, 1996

¹² Correll et al., 2007
¹³ Chouinard, 2007



WHY SOME WOMEN DRINK TOO MUCH

How are we to understand the feminization of alcohol abuse in certain age groups? The most common and best documented explanations fall into two categories. The first is related to the role of women, and the second has to do with the circumstances under which women drink.

WOMEN'S EVER-EXPANDING ROLES

Although men and women share financial, domestic and family responsibilities more fairly than ever before, the division of labour by gender is still unequal. The unbalance is particularly noticeable in households composed of a couple with children.¹⁴ Women still feel, and in fact generally are, primarily responsible for planning and organizing everything related to child care.

Many researchers have suggested that women who play multiple roles are in better health than those who don't.¹⁵ In particular, the phenomenon of women with children joining the work force has been seen as a protective factor promoting mental health.

However, when demands exceed a person's capacity or drain her resources, then well-being is threatened.¹⁶ When women bear all the responsibilities alone, they can feel overwhelmed and experience stress, and this puts them at a greater risk for abusive drinking.¹⁷ Thus, the multiplication of roles can push a woman to her limits and become a risk factor.

Conversely, some researchers have noted that the loss of social roles is what sometimes puts women at greater risk for heavy drinking.¹⁸ When women lose or abandon certain roles—for example, when their children leave home, or they quit a job in order to take care of their families—some of them experience anxiety and despair, which, in turn, increases the risk of excessive drinking.

These explanations, i.e. that excessive drinking among women is a response to a disturbing condition related to their roles, are frequently picked up by the media. But while such observations may be true for women who have become dependent on alcohol—less than 1% of the population—they are rarely confirmed among non-clinical populations.

¹⁴ Lacroix and Boulet, 2013

¹⁵ Bernstein, 2001; Whitehead, Burström and Diderichsen, 2000

¹⁶ Lazarus, 1990

¹⁷ Cho and Crittenden, 2006; Dawson, Grant and Ruan, 2005; Fillmore, 1984; Holmila and Raitasalo, 2005

¹⁸ Cho and Crittenden, 2006; Wilsnack and Cheloha, 1987



ROLE-RELATED OPPORTUNITY

Opportunity is another equally plausible explanation. Even these days, women feel like they are primarily responsible for all planning and organization related to child care. For example, men with young children report an average of 3.6 hours per day of free time, while their female counterparts report a significantly lower 2.5 hours.¹⁹ Insofar as drinking is a social activity that competes for time with other things that must get done, the fact that women have less free time probably explains partly why women drink less than men, not only in terms of amount per occasion but also in terms of frequency.

Given this, women's drinking habits cannot be determined solely by their roles and responsibilities. They must also be considered as a consequence of the locations, circumstances and environments they find themselves in, given their roles.²⁰

CONTEXT AND THE IMPORTANT OF ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

A number of studies conducted recently, particularly in Canada, have shown that the immediate environment is a determining factor with regard to the amount of alcohol consumed.²¹ These results lead us to consider that the increases in drinking prevalence and frequency observed among some categories of women may well be due to the way alcohol has been made available and sold in recent years.

Women have become a target market for alcoholic beverage developers. Since the early 1990s, for example, products appearing on the shelves at the Société des alcools du Québec include lemon-, raspberry- and vanilla-flavoured spirits. These flavours have been developed specifically to attract women. Attractive packaging and targeted advertising are also increasingly intended for the female market.²²

It is perfectly acceptable for women to have access to products designed for them. Much less acceptable, and even disturbing, is the way in which alcohol is sometimes made available to women in pubs, bars and dance clubs.

Excessive drinking is particularly notable among young women.²³ And young women are the ones more likely to frequent pubs, bars and dance clubs. In Quebec, even though it is illegal, some of these establishments regularly offer women alcohol at greatly reduced prices, sometimes even for free. Some bars that are very popular with college and university students regularly have "ladies' night," when women can drink as much as they want, at no charge. These practices are not only unethical and dangerous, they are completely illegal, and the Ethics Council of the Alcohol Beverage Industry in Quebec discusses them in its Annual Report.²⁴

Finally, some advertising has used the pretext of sexual equality to encourage women to drink like men. A few years ago, a major brewery broke new ground by launching a campaign more or less challenging women to take men on. The ad asked: Is she worth the money? Can she go the distance? In other words, sexual equality was being used to sell alcohol, as though going head-to-head over pints of beer were proof.

It is important to emphasize that such campaigns are cruelly negligent, as women are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol than men. This has nothing to do with equality between the sexes and everything to do with biology. Inciting women to drink like men is taking direct aim at their health.

¹⁹ Annual prevalence of abusive drinking is 59.4% among Quebec women 15 and older, but it climbs to 79% among women 18-24, and 78.3% among women 25-34.

²⁴ The mandate of the Ethics Council of the Alcoholic Beverage Industry in Quebec is to oversee the application of the industry's code of ethics; evaluate, in light of the complaints it receives, how well its members are complying with the code; and determine the extent to which it should use its powers to enforce the code. The Council publishes an Annual Report containing details of complaints filed against licensed establishments. <http://www.conseillethique.qc.ca/en/index.php>

¹⁹ Lacroix and Boulet, 2013

²⁰ Paradis, 2011a

²¹ Demers et al., 2002a and 2002b; Demers and Kairouz, 2003; Kairouz et al., 2002; Paradis, 2011a and 2011b; Paradis et al., 2011

²² Forget, 2009

THE IMPACT OF ALCOHOL ON WOMEN'S HEALTH

ALCOHOL METABOLISM

A woman who drinks exactly the same amount as a man will have a higher blood alcohol content. In other words, it takes less alcohol for a woman to feel the same effects.

The difference is metabolic, and is due primarily to the fact that the average woman weighs less than the average man and generally has a higher body fat percentage. Also, women have less body water than a man of the same weight (fat tissue contains less water than muscle tissue), so the alcohol is distributed in a smaller volume of body liquid. Thus, if a man and a woman drink the same amount of alcohol, the woman will have a higher blood alcohol concentration. Women also tend to have smaller livers than men and therefore smaller amounts of alcohol dehydrogenase, the liver enzyme responsible for breaking down the alcohol molecules. Consequently, a greater percentage of the alcohol a woman drinks will stay in her blood.²⁵

As alcohol consumption increases, the health risks rise more quickly for women. These risks are summarized below.

²⁵ This also holds true for transgendered men who, although they identify as men, were born with women's organs.





ILLNESSES

Consuming more than is recommended in the low-risk drinking guidelines can lead to various health problems over the long term. In addition to the danger of developing a dependence, women who have more than two drinks per occasion and more than 10 drinks a week are at increased risk for certain chronic diseases.

Women are more likely than men to suffer alcohol-related disorders, and their risk of stroke is at least double. Women who drink are also more likely to develop alcoholic hepatitis than men.

For women under the age of 70, a small amount of alcohol may have certain health benefits (e.g. a reduced risk of diabetes and ischemic strokes). However, even when women have an average of one drink a day, it is estimated that their risk increases for other diseases, such as certain cancers and cirrhosis.²⁶

The research on which the low-risk drinking guidelines are based does not include health risks for women 70 and older, who are advised to drink less than the amount recommended for younger adults.

²⁶ Butt et al., 2011, Griswold et al., 2018



Breast cancer

Drinking alcohol increases the risk of various cancers, particularly cancers of the mouth and pharynx, the larynx, the esophagus and the liver. Most troubling for women is the risk of breast cancer, which accounts for 5,000 deaths a year in Canada.²⁷ The risk estimates calculated by the expert committee that produced the low-risk drinking guidelines highlight the fact that the risk of breast cancer increases by 13% in women who have an average of just one drink a day. At two drinks a day, the risk goes up by 27% and at three and four drinks, it climbs by 52%.²⁸ A meta-analysis of 60 research studies conducted around the world has shown that, compared to women who do not drink at all, those who stayed within the low-risk drinking guidelines increased their risk of breast cancer by 8.5%, while those who exceeded the guidelines increased their risk by 37%.²⁹

It is important to note that this does not mean that 8.5% of women who have one or two drinks a day will develop breast cancer, but rather that women who have one or two drinks a day increase their risk of breast cancer by 8.5%. For example, among women 30-49, the risk of being diagnosed with any type of breast cancer is 0.13%.³⁰ In the same age group, for women who have one to two drinks a day, the risk increases by 0.011% (8.5% of 0.13%) and thus rises from 0.13% to 0.141%.

This indicates that women, especially those with a family history of breast cancer, should drink wisely and moderately.

²⁷ Canadian Cancer Society, 2019

²⁸ Butt et al., 2011

²⁹ Zeisser, Stockwell and Chikritzhs, 2014

³⁰ Canadian Cancer Society, 2019

MEDICATIONS

Some medications, including over-the-counter painkillers like acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®), can slow the elimination of alcohol, enhance or mask its effects, or cause unpredictable reactions. Conversely, alcohol can make certain medications less effective or inhibit their elimination.

Remember that both alcohol and medications are eliminated by the liver. And since women have smaller livers, it's better for them to abstain from drinking while taking medication.

Note that women's greater vulnerability to the harm caused by mixing alcohol and psychotropic drugs (antidepressants, sleeping pills, neuroleptics, anti-anxiety medication, mood regulators) is not due as much to their biological differences from men as to the fact that such medications are prescribed to women more frequently than to men. A major French study in 2012 showed that, no matter what their age, more women take psychotropic medications than men: 23% vs. 13%.³¹ In Quebec, when 13 classes of medication were considered, it was found that 62.4% of women took at least one of the medications, compared to 46.9% of men.³² As a group, therefore, women are more likely to suffer problems related to combining alcohol with medication.



³¹ INSERM, 2012

³² Commissaire à la santé et au bien-être, 2014, p. 171

PREGNANCY AND NURSING

Given that no amount of alcohol is known to be safe during pregnancy and nursing, the best option for women who are pregnant, or thinking of becoming pregnant, is to abstain from drinking.

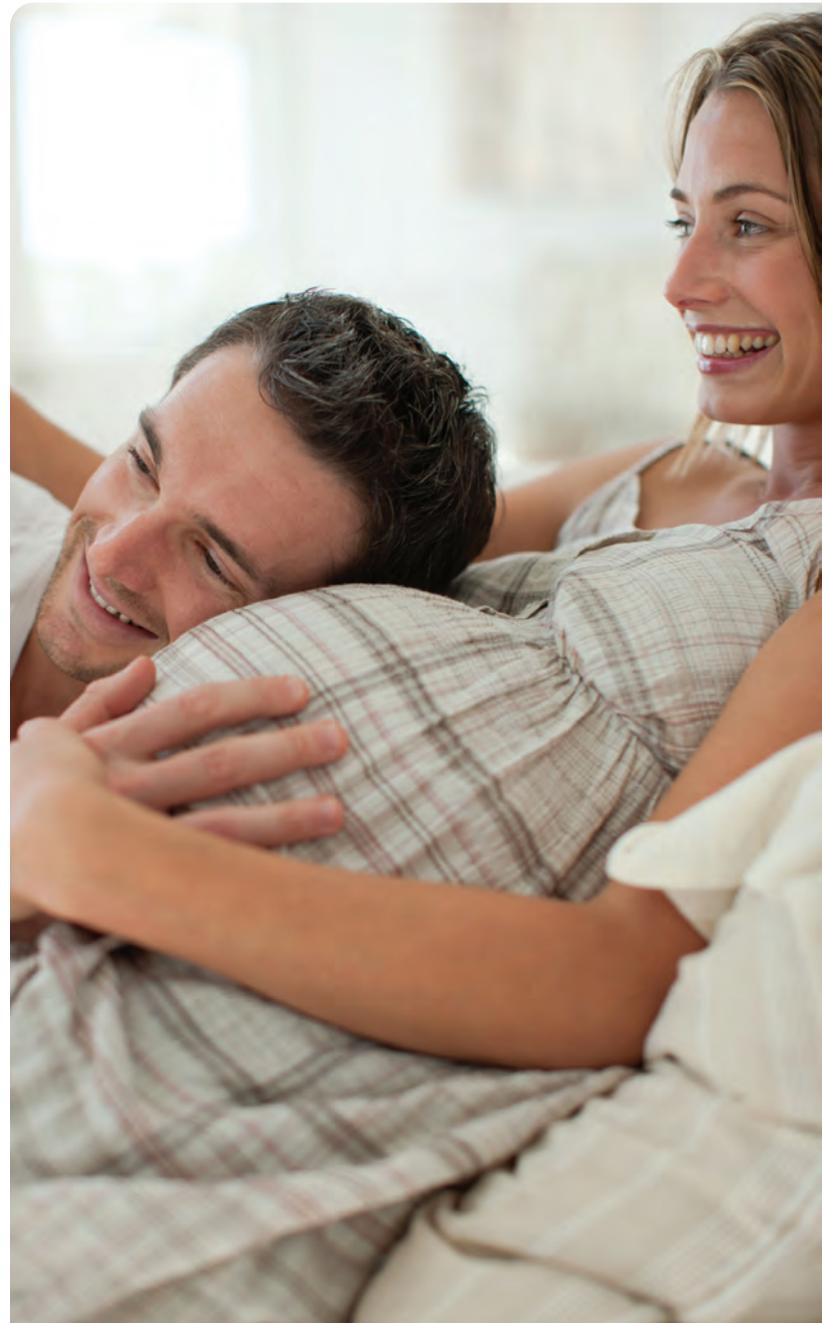
Reducing your alcohol intake from the moment you start trying to conceive provides a healthy environment for conception and fetal development. Avoiding alcohol altogether is an even safer choice. It is often difficult to identify the exact moment of conception and the embryo is particularly vulnerable during the first trimester.

To date, research has not been able to determine a minimum amount of alcohol that is entirely safe for the development of a baby, even though there is no proof that one occasional drink has a harmful effect on the fetus.³³ An American study of 4,500 women, one third of whom had drunk alcohol during their pregnancy, showed that women who had drunk moderately, i.e. one drink a week, gave birth to babies with no sign of the group of conditions known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD).³⁴

However, the risks of miscarriage, fetal deformation, growth retardation and mental impairment increase with the amount of alcohol the mother drinks on a single occasion and the frequency with which she drinks. FASD can occur when the fetus is exposed to alcohol in utero, since the alcohol passes through the placenta. FASD causes developmental delays that last throughout the child's life.

A recent study has measured the scope of this phenomenon. Researchers looked at the physical and cognitive development of six- and seven-year-old schoolchildren in the American Midwest, in a middle-class population. At the same time, they interviewed the parents of the children and measured the mothers' alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Ultimately, they estimated the prevalence of FASD among the population to be 3.6%.³⁵ The main predictors of FASD were late recognition of pregnancy, the amount of alcohol consumed by the mother during the three months preceding the pregnancy, and the amount of alcohol consumed by the father (suggesting the father's influence on the mother's drinking). Such results raise concerns that pregnant women, and women in a position to become pregnant, are drinking too much alcohol.

A newborn exposed to alcohol through breastfeeding can show signs of sedation and poor motor skills. It is better for nursing mothers to abstain from drinking, but if they choose to drink, they should wait at least two hours before breastfeeding after having one drink. If they choose to have a second drink, they should feed the baby milk expressed before they had any alcohol.³⁶



³³ Mamluk et al., 2017

³⁴ Lundsberg et al., 2014

³⁵ May et al., 2014

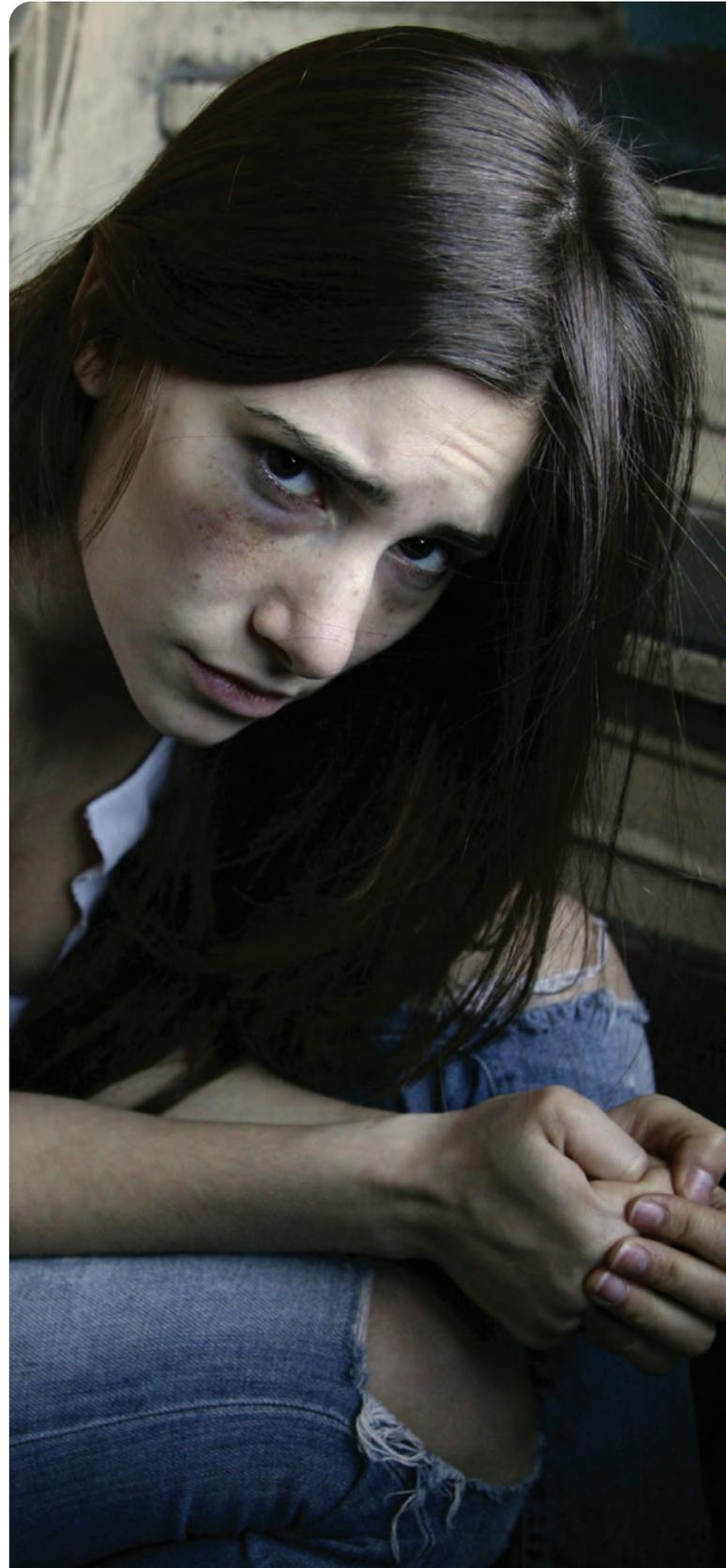
³⁶ Lévesque and April, 2017

SAFETY AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING

Physical violence, family and interpersonal conflicts, financial difficulties, unplanned sex, unwanted pregnancies and even problems at work or at school are all problems commonly associated with drinking. Further to numerous published studies on the subject of women and alcohol, a World Health Organization report noted rightly that abusive drinking can lead to a loss of self-control and impaired capacity to process information, thus heightening impulsiveness and emotional instability and making some people more likely to react violently to confrontation.

For women, the loss of physical control and impairment of their ability to recognize the signs of a potentially dangerous situation can make them easy targets for violence or sexual assault. This is especially true since discrimination against women persists and society has yet to fully embrace the concept of equality in sexual relationships. People are still far too likely to believe that just because a woman stops struggling, it means she is consenting to sex. Intoxication makes women vulnerable to unwanted sex or to violence if they resist.

In this culture, women are particularly at risk of becoming victims of gender-based violence. While this is certainly unfair, women must be careful and follow to the low-risk drinking guidelines in order not to become more vulnerable to aggressive behaviour, violence or sexual assault. Women should be particularly suspicious of men who come on to them and urge them to drink a lot.





CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, four fifths of women in Quebec drink alcohol and do so moderately, in terms of both frequency and volume. There is no indication of the extreme feminization of abusive drinking. However, among certain age groups, we are witnessing an increase in the prevalence and frequency of excessive episodic drinking, and we must be on guard.

Studies in various fields—biology, psychology, sociology, history—have produced a body of data on women and drinking. It shows that part of the reason women drink the way they do lies within our culture, where the division of labour between men and women remains unequal. Another part of the explanation can be found in the immediate drinking environment, which has been shown to have a determining influence on drinking behaviour. Also, with increasing frequency, and sometimes under the false pretext of sexual equality, women are encouraged to consume quantities of alcohol that are inappropriate for their biological makeup. Finally, it is worth noting that an intoxicated woman is more vulnerable than an intoxicated man.

As for the different biological responses to alcohol between men and women, the research is conclusive. Women are more susceptible than men to the effects of alcohol because of differences in size, body fat content and the way they metabolize alcohol. In addition, certain sex-specific diseases, such as breast cancer and fetal alcohol syndrome disorders, occur at very low levels of alcohol consumption. Caution is in order.

Lastly, it is important to remember that social norms, not biology, are responsible for making women who drink more vulnerable than men to physical and sexual violence. The concept of true gender equality is still not fully integrated in our culture.

For all these reasons, Éduc'alcool invites all women in Quebec to adopt its slogan: *Moderation is always in good taste.*

Éduc'alcool would like to thank Louise Nadeau, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychology at the University of Montreal, and associate researcher with the Douglas Mental Health University Institute, McGill University, for her inestimable help in revising the final version of this publication.

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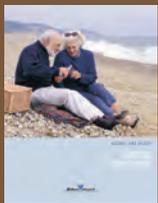
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A review of the research on how moderate, regular alcohol consumption affects human health.



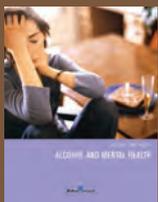
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