

Living Well: Gender differences about alcohol are sobering

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In the years since researchers linked red wine to good health and longer life, the standard recommendation for moderate consumption is two glasses for men and one for women. That lack of a second glass is one difference that women notice with, say, their boyfriends or husbands.

Women have heard this rationale too: They are smaller in body size, so alcohol affects them more readily, whether at the time or the next day.

A new study from University of Minnesota researchers suggests another significant difference among women and men who drink alcoholic beverages, red wine or otherwise. It seems women are more likely to internalize drinking problems than men, especially by feeling depressed or guilty about their habits.

Guys, on the other hand, are much more likely to exhibit more outward displays of drinking behaviors that infringe on quality of everyday life. Some examples: Fighting, drinking more heavily, and tolerating more servings.

"Our hope is to influence how drinking problems are diagnosed," said Penny Nichol, the lead researcher for the new study and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota. "Right now, there is more of a male slant. It's possible we are not capturing women's symptoms."

Dennis Donovan, director of the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute at the University of Washington, made an important point about diagnosis when reviewing the study results.

"There are probably more people with alcohol problems being treated in primary-care doctors' offices than alcohol intervention centers," Donovan said. "Same goes for people being prescribed antidepressants. People are ending up in medical clinics for these problems."

He said it is quite common for women being treated for depression to address their drinking (often coincidentally) at the same time.

Donovan and the University of Washington are involved in efforts to educate family-care physicians and other general practitioners to identify and address alcohol issues among patients. The idea is to develop better screening and prevention methods. Donovan credited both Group Health Cooperative and the trauma center at Harborview Medical Center as facilities that are pro-active about screening for drinking problems and offering "motivational intervention."

"The old stereotype that women are closet problem drinkers in the confines of their own homes has died," he said. "Women are clearly out and more involved in all parts of society and working life. But the acting-out behaviors are still much more often found in men."

The Minnesota study suggests that questions about emotional state and self-esteem are perhaps as relevant as whether someone acts out when drinking. One vital note about the study: The 2,700-plus participants were parents leading responsible lives.

Donovan noted that research shows women tend to develop drinking problems later than men, but once they do have a problem it "telescopes" or heightens at a faster rate. He clarified that university drinking is fairly high among both females and males and that many college students move out of heavy consumption patterns beyond age 25 as they assume more responsibility in life.

But drinking at a younger age has its definite risk for females or males. A 2006 Boston University study showed that people 18 to 25 are less likely to seek treatment for alcohol problems and that long-term alcoholism is significantly more likely if a heavy alcohol habit is adopted during the late teen and early adult years. Other recent studies have highlighted the disturbing trend toward more binge drinking on college campuses.

The Minnesota study will be published in the May issue of the professional journal *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*. Nichol and colleagues considered 105 different signs of alcohol abuse and problems, finding that about one-third sorted for gender differences.

"We need to do more research," said Nichol, but added the data suggests there needs to be a female-oriented scale for alcohol screening or at least "gender-neutral" diagnostic tools. That's why the study loaded up on asking participants about their feelings regarding drinking.

"If you don't see it (externally), it can be hard to tell someone's drinking problems," said Donovan.

The solution, in part, is to ask. And ask the right questions. It is common knowledge among behavioral scientists and practitioners that people under-report their alcohol consumption. This new study suggests that women, in particular, may be underdiagnosed and untreated when help might be just the tonic for a healthier, happier life. The first step is realizing drinking can wreak havoc.

Donovan said problem drinkers fall into two basic categories, whether men or women.

"People either keep trying to quit drinking or they stop trying," he said. "I'm not sure where that line is."