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Alcohol is killing more women than ever before

As the gender gap in drinking narrows, alcohol-related complications in women are rising. From immune system disorders to breast cancer, here's how alcohol harms the female body.

Federal guidelines recommend that women who want to drink consume no more than one serving a day. But from a health perspective, less—or none—is a better target.

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• 7 MIN READ

Jasmine Charbonier's heavy drinking started in college. By her early thirties, she was downing up to eight tequila cocktails daily, several days each week. Last year she tried to quit and was surprised when she plummeted into withdrawal.

New research shows that while men are still more likely to die from an alcohol-related disease, the gap is narrowing. The rise in deaths results from an unfortunate gender equality: Women now raise their glass almost as frequently as men. A recent government survey found [49 percent](#) of women drank in the prior month, compared to 55 percent of men. [Women in their thirties and forties](#), in particular, are now drinking more than male counterparts.

Unlike hard drugs, alcohol is generally viewed as a less dangerous way to destress and reduce inhibitions for women, says Dhruti Patel, a specialist in addiction psychiatry at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. "It's legal, readily available, and not so taboo in society, so women feel less worry drinking," she says.

That was certainly the case for Charbonier. "I was the friend on vacation having mimosas at 8 A.M.," says Charbonier, a 35-year-old fundraising specialist, entrepreneur, and blogger, in Tampa, Florida. Drinking made nights out and travel more fun, enabling her to meet new people and dance without inhibition. Last year, she temporarily gave up alcohol to lose a few pounds and was startled

by the withdrawal symptoms: intense cravings, heightened anxiety, and periodic hand tremors. "I was completely shocked," she says. "I didn't think I had an addiction until then."

Different bodies, stronger effects

Cute terms like mommy juice or liquid courage belie the reality that even small amounts of wine, beer, or cocktails endanger health. Last year, the global nonprofit World Heart Federation challenged the widely held notion that a daily glass of red wine is good for you. Any amount [increases](#) the risk for heart disease, stroke, and aneurysms, the group stated.

Even when consuming the same amount of alcohol as men, women are [more susceptible](#) to its negative effects. Experts point to women's body composition, which has more fatty tissue and less water than men of similar weight, leading to higher and more persistent blood-alcohol concentration. Women also have fewer enzymes that metabolize alcohol. And their hormonal fluctuations are thought to play a role in how quickly alcohol breaks down.

Moreover, women who drink develop a greater number of medical problems, and at much lower alcohol levels, than men. Women who consume less than [two drinks](#) a day increase their risk of death from any cause, according to an analysis published in March.

While more men die from alcohol use than women, the [recent study published in JAMA Network Open](#) found the gap is shrinking. Annual alcohol-related deaths in the United States were relatively stable for both sexes until 2007, after which they increased a few percentage points for each.

Starting in 2018, the numbers jumped dramatically. Women's deaths began rising 15 percent annually, versus a 12.5 percent increase for men.

This finding is not unexpected, says Ibraheem Karaye, assistant professor of population health at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, and the study's coauthor. "It's logical that we would see these sex differences in alcohol-related deaths considering the literature has been showing that the gap in consumption has been narrowing and complications in women are rising," he says. A portion of the stark increase may also be attributable to the opioid epidemic, since people tend to abuse more than one substance simultaneously, he says.

Deaths from alcohol can occur swiftly, such as the sudden heart or liver failure of alcohol poisoning, or the car accidents, falls, or drownings after drinking too much.

But most of the deaths reflect the toll from longer-term consumption, Karaye says, including from its eventual impact on the liver, the pancreas, or heart.