

Substances and Women: Different From Men

The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) presented a special conference in March 2006, titled *Women Under the Influence: Substance Abuse and the American Woman*. The conference coincided with the release of the book by the same title, an exhaustive analysis of ten years of research. Among several key topics, the book highlights the dangerous relationship of pregnancy and substance abuse. *Women Under the Influence* finds that unlike smoking, alcohol use during pregnancy is on the rise. The authors estimate that by the late 1990s, twenty percent of women were drinking during pregnancy, a 67 percent increase from the early 1990s.¹ This article highlights some of the research findings.

Smoking

- Approximately one in five women in the US smokes.²
- More women die each year from lung cancer than from breast, uterine, and ovarian cancers combined.³
- While the rate of lung cancer deaths has declined among men, the rate has soared by 600 percent among women.⁴
- A longitudinal study of 12–13 year- old smokers found that girls became dependent much more rapidly than boys.⁵
- Almost one-half of women who smoke (47%) will ultimately die from smoking-related diseases.⁶
- Women in later adulthood who smoke are about twice as likely to develop heart disease as non-smokers.⁷
- Women who smoke and use oral contraceptives increase their risk of a heart attack by 1,000 percent.⁸
- Approximately 15,000 nonsmoking women die of lung cancer annually.⁹

Alcohol

- Six million women in the United States abuse or are dependent on alcohol.¹⁰
- Nearly one-half of high school girls drink alcohol and more than one in four binge drink.¹¹
- Teenage girls who are heavy drinkers are five times more likely to have sex and a third less likely to use protection than girls who don't drink.¹²
- Alcohol is involved in as many as 73 percent of all rapes and up to 70 percent of all incidents of domestic violence.¹³
- Women who drink get drunk faster, become addicted more easily, and develop alcohol-related diseases more readily than men who drink.¹⁴
- The average woman who drinks is young, white, and employed or in school.¹⁵
- 23 percent of young girls have had their first drink before reaching their teen years.¹⁶
- Daughters of alcoholics tend to have less of a physiological response to alcohol, increasing the risk of heavy drinking and the development of subsequent alcohol

problems.¹⁷

- More than two-thirds of alcohol-abusing women seeking treatment have experienced some form of childhood sexual abuse compared to one-third of women in the general population.¹⁸
- Women suffer higher rates of late-onset alcohol abuse than men.¹⁹
- As early as the sixth grade, girls are likelier than boys to believe that a positive effect of alcohol is its ability to allay bad moods or feelings.²⁰
- Women appear to be more susceptible to alcohol-induced brain impairment and damage than men.²¹
- Women are more likely to develop cirrhosis of the liver and other liver diseases, to develop them sooner and at lower levels of drinking.²²
- Alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer in some women who are even moderate drinkers.²³
- Postmenopausal women who drink moderate amounts of alcohol have a higher risk of breast cancer if they use hormone replacement therapy, a known risk factor for breast cancer.²⁴
- Alcohol use affects the health of postmenopausal women directly, through its impact on organ systems such as the liver, brain and gastrointestinal tract, and indirectly, by altering the blood levels of sex steroids that affect the risk for disease.²⁵
- Depression is the most frequent coexisting psychological problem for women with drinking problems and women who drink alcohol are twice as likely as other women to be depressed.^{26, 27}

Women and Prescription and Illicit Drugs

- More than 7.5 million girls and women misuse or abuse prescription drugs each year.²⁸
- Women are up to 48 percent more likely than men to be prescribed a narcotic, anti-anxiety, or other potentially abusable drug.²⁹
- More than half of American women from 18–25 have used illicit drugs at least once in their lives.³⁰
- More than 2.5 million women abuse or are dependent on illicit drugs.³¹
- Two out of three AIDS cases in American women are associated with drug abuse.³²
- Women in state prisons are twice as likely as their male counterparts to be infected with HIV.³³

Pregnancy and Substance Abuse

- Drinking during pregnancy is the single greatest preventable cause of mental retardation.³⁴
- A little more than half of the pregnant women who drink say that a health care provider discussed drinking during pregnancy.³⁵
- 17 percent of pregnant women smoke, 3 percent binge drink, and 3 percent use illicit drugs.³⁶

- Smoking during pregnancy accounts for 14 percent of premature births and 10 percent of infant deaths.³⁷

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