

My advice: no more than two drinks on any one night

Women are now drinking at more dangerous levels than men, according to a new book. Its author tells [Barbara McMahon](#) why affluent, middle-class women are so badly affected

Last orders ladies, please. Women's drinking is now at more dangerous levels than that of men. The author of a new book published in the United States has collated damning evidence about the extent of female drinking and refers to it as a hidden-in-plain-sight epidemic. What is particularly worrying, she says, is that alcohol affects women very differently from the way it affects men. And when drinking becomes a problem, the standard treatments that have worked for men often just don't work for women.

Gabrielle Glaser, the author of *Her Best-Kept Secret*, says that solid statistics are hard to come by since many women like to keep the extent of their alcohol intake hidden. But, by every quantitative measure, women are drinking more than before. The number of middle-aged women who sought treatment for their alcohol problem in the US tripled between 1992 and 2000, she writes. Binge-drinking is becoming more commonplace among middle-aged women. Women are being charged more often with drunk driving and are being treated more often in emergency rooms for the effects of intoxication.

Women are the wine industry's most enthusiastic customers, Glaser reports, while men's drinking, their arrests for drunk driving and alcohol purchases are flat or even falling. "Alcohol is a socially acceptable and legal way to get through the post-feminist, breadwinning or stay-at-home-life that women lead," she says. "It's a drug women can respectably use in public, and in private, even if it carries with it the risk of taking them under."

Researchers believe that predisposition towards alcohol abuse is a mix of factors, including learned behaviour, genes and psychology. The way it affects men and women is markedly different, says Glaser. The toxic effects of alcohol show up much more quickly in women due to their higher body fat and lower levels of water, which dilutes alcohol. "Women absorb more alcohol into their bloodstream than men, so women drinking the same amount as men for their size and weight become intoxicated more quickly," says Glaser. This may be one reason, she speculates in the book, why alcohol-related liver and brain damage appears more often in heavy drinking women than men.

Nearly two thirds of women drink regularly and the more educated and well-off a woman is the more likely she is to hit the booze, according to numerous studies which suggest it is a worldwide problem. White women are more likely to drink than women of other racial backgrounds, though that is changing.

Gender differences also show up in the effects of alcohol, generating different reactions in men and women. Research at Harvard in the 1970s by the clinical psychologist Sharon Wilksack found that men reported feeling increasingly powerful and

aggressive when drinking, while women said they felt calmer, less inhibited and more easy-going. In 2012, Yale researchers using imaging equipment found that areas of the brain associated with craving were activated by different cues in men and women. Stress was the biggest trigger in cocaine-dependent women while visual prompts, such as photos of the drug, stimulated cravings in the brains of cocaine-dependent men.

Glaser said this corresponded with her own research findings that women use wine for stress relief and relaxation. "Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from anxiety and depression, and they're much more likely to medicate those conditions with alcohol," she says. She describes in the book the "striking trend of women in their thirties, forties and fifties who are getting through their days of work, and nights with teething toddlers, trying teenagers, or sick parents, by hitting the bottle".

Alcohol dependence is also rising precipitously in the UK. This year researchers at University College London Department of Epidemiology and Public Health published research that looked at real alcohol intake compared to reported alcohol intake. They found that women drink more than men and are also more likely to under-report how much they drink. The research, published in the *European Journal of Public Health*, found that 80 per cent of women, compared with 75 per cent of men, were found to have consumed more than their recommended dose on their heaviest drinking day of the week.

Self-reported alcohol only accounts for between 40 and 60 per cent of alcohol sales. After correcting the data for the under-reporting of consumption, they found that binge-drinking increased by 28 per cent in women and 20 per cent in men, moving the overall estimate of adults in the UK considered binge-drinkers up to 56 per cent for women and 52 per cent for men.

A study carried out this year in the UK suggested that affluent women are more likely to drink too much. Patrick Tate, the director of analytics for CACI, the firm that carried out the research, found that 66 per cent of women residing in wealthier areas of the UK, such as Knightsbridge, consumed more than three units of alcohol a day — above the daily recommended limit — compared with an average figure of just 29.8 per cent nationally. Glaser says that the situation is the same in the US: "The research shows that, for the most part, it's largely a bourgeois problem."

In the book, the Washington University epidemiologist Rick Grucza draws a parallel between the rise in women's alcohol consumption and the increasing numbers of women in further education. "Women born in the Forties, Fifties and Sixties were freer to engage in a range of behaviours that were off-limits to previous generations — and that includes excessive drinking," he noted.

And yet *Her Best-Kept Secret* is not a call

to temperance. Glaser says that the traditional methods we consider the gold standard in dealing with drinking problems — abstinence and Alcoholics Anonymous — are not effective for women and may not be necessary. There are many new and successful methods of dealing with women's excessive drinking that include a mixture of medication, professional therapy and self-help.

"The good news is that we understand a lot more about the brain than we ever did before," she says. "There's no reason to believe that, once a person develops a problem, it's going to be a lifelong condition from which they can never graduate. This might be true for a small fraction of people who drink to excess, but it's certainly not true for everybody."

A 49-year-old former journalist from Oregon, Glaser was prompted to write the book after her own excessive drinking five years ago. "I was drinking too much during a really stressful time — a cross-country move with three kids, leaving a city I loved, and saying goodbye to my parents and my sister," she says, speaking in New Jersey, where she lives now. "Wine seemed like an excellent idea, and it was. But I would overdo it. I started drinking at five o'clock and after three glasses was totally useless by seven and I had several hours of work ahead of me."

She noticed that women all around her were drinking, too. Women drank if they worked and drank if they didn't work. They drank at book clubs and at jewellery parties. They gave each other gifts of booze and knowing looks.

"There's nothing wrong with a glass of wine to relax, or even a bit more than that, but when it slides into three and four glasses, I think that's when the problems start," says Glaser. "You lose your ability to function properly at night. It takes away your ability to read, for example, and it takes away your ability to do any sort of effective work. These are not problems that are going to put you into rehab, but they are problems because they blunt your ability to focus in the evenings."

Glaser has been criticised for denigrating AA, saying that it was founded in the 1930s by men and for men and has not kept pace with the times. It is ill-suited to most women, she believes. "The 12-step approach instructs drinkers to surrender their egos to a higher power, but women who drink too much aren't necessarily suffering from an excess of hubris," she says.

She explains: "The word 'alcoholic' is something we really need to move beyond. It's sort of a hopeless word and a category that doesn't really mean anything." She believes that women who are worried about their drinking should find a doctor who is experienced in treating alcohol abuse disorders with the most current forms of treatment. There are also self-help groups that help women take control of their drinking habits.

Through her own experiences and by writing the book, Glaser says that she gained an understanding of how easily, swiftly and imperceptibly women can slip into drinking too much. She now keeps a strict internal log. "No more than two drinks on any night, and a few nights a week with none," she says.

Gabrielle Glaser's *Her Best-Kept Secret: Why Women Drink — And How They Can Regain Control* is published by Simon & Schuster

Gabrielle Glaser, author of *Her Best-Kept Secret*



Women and drinking The facts

Nearly 30 per cent of British women drink more than three units of alcohol a day. This rises to 66 per cent in wealthy areas of the country.
80 per cent of British women drink more than the recommended limit on their heaviest drinking day of the week.
56 per cent of women in the UK are considered binge drinkers.
22 per cent of regular female drinkers drink more than twice the recommended limits on at least one day a week.
More women are being convicted for drink driving each year — convictions have increased by 16 per cent in the past ten years.
Male rates are falling.
Women aged 40 and over who drink and drive are found to be further over the alcohol limit than men and women of any other age group.

SOURCE: UCL, HSE, ALCOHOL CONCERN UK

“When drink is a problem, the treatments that work for men often don't suit women”

Cut down your drinking The rules for women

The most common reasons women drink too much are anxiety, loneliness and boredom, says psychologist Dr Mary Ellen Barnes. The usual drink of choice is wine. "I'd say 96 per cent of the women we see drink chardonnay and for the rest it's vodka, beer and red wine," her colleague Dr Ed Wilson adds.

For the past ten years women from all over the world, including the UK, have sought help for their drinking problems from the two psychologists who practice in Rolling Hills Estates in Los Angeles. The doctors are on the frontline of the female drinking epidemic in the US. Most of the women they treat are aged between 40 and 55.

Women drinkers fall into two categories, they say. A few are alcohol dependent and start having withdrawal symptoms the minute they quit drinking. Most of the women they see are alcohol abusers and will be able to get their drinking under control if they really want to. Some even find it easy once they start.

They say it is unhelpful to generalise alcohol abuse. "It's a mosaic, with a spectrum, just like any other condition," says Dr Wilson. "There's no one-size-fits-all problem or treatment. Everybody's triggers and risk factors are different."

The psychologists say the CAGE test is a useful exercise to help women determine if they are drinking too much.

C. Have you ever felt you should cut down your drinking?

A. Have people annoyed you by criticising your drinking?

G. Have you ever felt guilty about your drinking?

E. The eye-opener. Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?

If you say "yes" to two answers, you could have a drinking problem; if you say "yes" to three or more then you definitely have a drinking problem.

Answering "yes" to these questions also indicates you have a problem:

1) Do you plan your day around your favorite drinking time?

2) Do you usually pick restaurants based on their wine list or whether they have a full bar, rather than the food, ambiance and company?

3) Do you take alcohol with you when you travel, just in case?

Their advice to help women get their drinking under control is: Eat something before you go home from work that will help your blood sugar rise, so you don't walk in the door tired and your blood sugar is so low that wine is "screaming for you to come and get it".

Be active and engaged in life. Happy people do not develop alcohol problems. "For women, or men for that matter, alcohol problems generally mean that something is not working in their lives," says Dr Barnes. "Women may not know how to handle stress, or perhaps they are not assertive in their relationships and

therefore feel unheard, powerless and frustrated in their marriage. Maybe they are bored, or lonely. The thing women need to understand is that alcohol abuse is the symptom not the primary problem. Of course, if the alcohol problem gets too bad, or goes on for too many years, it can become a huge problem itself. But generally, when a woman addresses what isn't working, then she can more easily conquer the alcohol problem."

Plan activities to relieve stress in the early evening when you might be tempted to start drinking. Go to the gym, do yoga, go out for a run, or go to the cinema or the theatre. If you are menopausal or perimenopausal, think about getting some HRT if you find your alcohol consumption increasing due to hormonal/menopausal symptoms.

Changing behaviour patterns is crucial, they say. "Let's say my pattern is that I walk in the door, get the wine, kick off my shoes, flip on the TV and watch the news," explains Dr Barnes. "If I'm worried I'm drinking too much, I might grab a cranberry juice instead of a glass of wine but I'm doing 99 per cent of a behaviour pattern and leaving out the one per cent that is my favourite. That doesn't work."

Women should not despair if they fall off the wagon. Dr Barnes explains: "It's like losing 50lbs. You're dieting, changing your habits and eating patterns, exercising more, and then the holidays come along and you're going to all these parties and you gain three pounds. But you've still lost 47lbs, so right after the holidays you get back on your eating and exercise plan. With alcohol, it's the same thing. I've had people call me in a panic to say they've had two drinks. Big deal. They were having a bad day and they flipped back into using alcohol as self-medication. You learn from it and move on."

Women generally start looking better as soon as they stop drinking. "The puffiness in their faces goes away within the week, they get that healthy glow back in their skin within a month. Their eyes start to sparkle again. It really is a great way to lose 10 years off your face in about 30 days," says Dr Barnes.

At their centre, the psychologists do intense, one-on-one treatment, which may involve a course of a craving-suppressing drug. They keep track of women for a year after they have finished treatment.

The psychologists say about 65 per cent of women are happy with the results, whether it is drinking moderately or abstaining. Of the rest, half report that they are still struggling with alcohol and the other half have disappeared.

The most common outcome is that women who want to moderate their drinking end up giving it up completely.

Dr Barnes says: "We see a lot of women who quit for a while, get their lives under control, and then say, 'You know what? I'm happy without the booze. I don't want to risk going back there.'" **Barbara McMahon**

“The most common reasons women drink too much are anxiety and loneliness”