

Australian alcohol guidelines – who is a risky drinker?

What is risky drinking? Regularly drinking more than two drinks a day (long-term risk) or binge drinking (more than four drinks at one sitting) increases the risk of illness and injury. Risky drinking, particularly frequent binge drinking, decreases with age and increasing responsibilities. Smokers of all ages are more likely to be risky drinkers. Interventions to decrease risky drinking should target younger women and smokers of all ages.

What is this research about?

Australian alcohol guidelines have been updated to take account of the risk of harm from drinking. For the first time, guidelines are the same for men and women:

- drink no more than two standard drinks a day
- drink no more than four standard drinks on a single occasion.

Although some studies have looked at risky drinking groups, few studies have reported on drinking behaviour in relation to alcohol guidelines in the general population. This study investigates women's drinking behaviour over the lifespan

What did the researchers do?

Almost 40,000 women in three age groups (18-23 years, 45-50 years and 70-75 years) were surveyed approximately every three years between 1996 and 2012. The women answered questions about how often and how much alcohol they usually drank per week, and how often they engaged in binge drinking.

Four drinking behaviours were defined: i) no risk, ii) binge less than once a month, iii) binge once a month or more, iv) long-term risk (more than two drinks a day on average). The four groups were then compared.

What did the research find?

Risky drinking decreases with age. A quarter of young women drink at no risk. Half drink at no risk in their late thirties, compared with two-thirds in their late forties and 90 per cent at 70-75 years.

In terms of binge drinking, one third of young women binge at least once a month but this drops rapidly to 15 per cent in their late thirties, 10 per cent in the late forties and less than 5 per cent at 70-75 years. Less frequent bingeing stays at about one third of women between 18 and 39, 20 per cent in their late forties, dropping to 15 per cent in their early sixties.

Few women drink at long-term risk. Smokers are most likely to be risky drinkers. Women who care for or have close relationships with others are less likely to be risky drinkers.



How can you use this research?

Risky drinking, particularly frequent bingeing is common in younger women and among smokers of all ages. Reminding younger women that they are not only responsible for themselves but also to others may reduce risky drinking. It may be beneficial to combine interventions to reduce risky drinking with interventions to reduce smoking.

Citation:

Powers JR, Anderson AE, Byles JE, Mishra G, Loxton D. Do women grow out of risky drinking? A prospective study of three cohorts of Australian women. *Drug Alcohol Rev.* [in press].

Keywords:

alcohol, drinking, guidelines, risk, women, smoking

Contact::

Jennifer Powers
jenny.powers@newcastle.edu.au

Australian Longitudinal
Study on Women's Health