

**DID YOU KNOW?**

- Early onset drinking is a major risk factor for developing alcohol abuse or dependence.¹¹
- Teenage girls who are heavy drinkers are five times more likely to engage in sexual intercourse and a third less likely to use condoms, which can result in pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases,¹² including HIV/AIDS. Women make up the fastest-growing segment of the population infected with HIV in the United States,¹³ and adolescents and young women are at particularly high risk.¹⁴
- Alcohol is involved in up to two-thirds of all sexual assaults and date rapes among adolescents and college students.¹⁵
- Among 8th grade girls who drink heavily, 37 percent report attempting suicide—compared to 11 percent who do not drink.¹⁶
- Girls who are sexually abused are twice as likely to develop drinking problems later.¹⁷
- Regular, heavy drinking has been associated with menstrual problems that can have a negative effect on fertility, such as pain, heavy flow, and irregular or absent periods.¹⁸
- Daughters of alcoholics are at increased risk for alcoholism. They are also more likely to marry men who are alcoholics.¹⁹

ALCOHOL USE AMONG GIRLS

According to SAMHSA's National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA), male and female rates of alcohol use among 12- to 17-year-olds were similar in the early 1990's for the first time.¹ Girls are beginning to drink at younger ages than ever before. In the 1960's, 7 percent of new female users of alcohol were ages 10 to 14, but by the early 1990's, that figure had risen to 31 percent.²

PREVALENCE OF ALCOHOL USE IN GIRLS

- According to SAMHSA's 1998 NHSDA, 38 percent of girls ages 12 through 17 reported ever using alcohol. Nearly 19 percent of these adolescent girls reported using alcohol in the past month compared with 20 percent who reported past-month alcohol use in the previous year.³
- This survey also indicates that nearly 7 percent of girls ages 12 through 17 reported binge drinking (having five or more drinks in a row at least once in the past month).⁴
- Overall, white non-Hispanic girls ages 12 to 17 reported the greatest levels of lifetime, past-year, and current use when compared with black non-Hispanic and Hispanic girls. Black non-Hispanic girls reported the lowest levels of alcohol use. In the past month, 22 percent of white non-Hispanic girls, 16 percent black non-Hispanic girls, and 18 percent of Hispanic girls reported using alcohol.⁵

SOME RISK FACTORS FOR GIRLS WHO USE ALCOHOL

Many of the reasons why adolescents drink are gender blind, but some factors may affect girls more than boys.

- Puberty tends to bring a higher incidence of depression among teenage girls, which can trigger alcohol use.⁶ One study found symptoms of depression in one in four girls—a rate that is 50 percent higher than in boys.⁷
- Adolescent girls who are heavy drinkers (drink five or more drinks in a row on at least 5 different days in the past month) are more likely than boys to say that they drink to escape problems or because of frustration or anger.⁸
- Friends have a big influence on teenagers overall, but girls are particularly susceptible to peer pressure when it comes to drinking. Adolescent girls are more likely than boys to drink to fit in with their friends, while boys drink largely for other reasons and then join a group that also drinks.⁹
- Girls often are introduced to alcohol by their boyfriends,¹⁰ who may be older and more likely to drink.

WHY DO MALES AND FEMALES RESPOND DIFFERENTLY TO ALCOHOL?

Females process alcohol differently than males; smaller amounts of alcohol are more intoxicating for females regardless of their size. Three physiological differences may explain this:

- Females have less body water than males. When people drink, alcohol spreads into the water in their bodies. Because females have smaller amounts of body water to dilute the alcohol, they have higher concentrations of alcohol in their blood than males have after drinking identical amounts of alcohol.²⁰
- An enzyme that is important in metabolizing or processing alcohol works differently in females than in males. In males, the enzyme—called alcohol dehydrogenase—breaks down much of the alcohol in the stomach so that less of it enters the circulatory system. In females, the enzyme is less active.²¹
- Changing hormone levels during the menstrual cycle may affect the rate of alcohol metabolism in females.²²

GIRL POWER!

Girl Power! is a national education campaign that was developed by SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Prevention to help encourage 9- to 14-year-old girls to make the most of their lives. Research shows that girls' attitudes begin to change around that age. They become less confident and less physically active, their school performance suffers, and they neglect their own interests and aspirations. All of these things make them more susceptible to negative influences and risky behaviors, such as drinking alcohol.

Girl Power! involves parents, schools, communities, health care professionals, and religious organizations in providing support, positive messages, and health information for girls. Julianna Margulies of NBC's "ER" and Olympic gold medalist Dominique Dawes have helped to publicize the campaign. Look for Girl Power! in public service announcements and posters, and visit the Girl Power! Web site at www.health.org/gpower to learn more.

For comparative information, please see SAMHSA's Alcohol Use Among Boys fact sheet.

SOURCES

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SAMHSA, a public health agency in the Department of Health and Human Services, is the Federal Government's lead agency for improving the quality and availability of substance abuse prevention, addiction treatment, and mental health services in the United States. Further information about SAMHSA is available on the Internet at www.samhsa.gov.