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Alcohol's Impact on Women's Nutrition

Dietary Guidelines for Alcohol Use

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) are a set of health guidelines updated every five years by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The nutrition guidelines outlined in the DGA's are the same guidelines that dietitians, doctors, and most health professionals use to guide people to a healthier lifestyle to reduce the risk of chronic diseases, such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. The current guidelines from 2020-2025 also contain suggestions to follow for alcohol consumption to maintain a healthy diet. The guidelines state that individuals may abstain from alcohol entirely or consume a moderate amount of alcohol per day without significant impacts to health. A moderate amount of alcohol use for women is defined as 1 drink per day. The definition of one drink is variable and is defined as ***either*** 1-12 oz regular beer, 1-8 oz malt beer, 1-5 oz glass of wine or 1.5 oz hard liquor drink.

Alcohols Effect on Women versus Men

Once you pass the level considered to be a moderate drinker, as defined by the DGAs, alcohol can increase your risk for nutrition-related diseases, especially if alcohol use and abuse continue long-term. Furthermore, women are affected by alcohol more than men. The digestive process and biological differences in women compared to men result in more alcohol being absorbed into the system and metabolized at a slower rate than in men[1]. As a result, women are 'drunk' longer than men and have more severe long-term consequences from high alcohol intake than men[2]

Chronic Disease Risk

While alcohol is most often associated with 'relaxing' and 'having a little fun', it can quickly and easily become abused. In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in more drinking and a particular spike in alcohol consumption among women. Excessive consumption of alcohol can affect your long-term health because alcohol begins to replace food in the diet. Increased alcohol consumption is related to an increase in red meat, high-fat dairy, and poultry foods and a decreased intake of whole grains, low-fat dairy, and fiber[3]. It is well established that an increased intake of red meat, high-fat dairy, and a low intake of whole grains and fiber-rich foods are all associated with an increased risk of heart disease and diabetes.

Brain Health

Apart from the increased risk of chronic diseases with alcohol abuse, increased alcohol consumption is linked to mental health impairment. Research has shown that women tend to experience cognitive decline and reduced brain size with excessive alcohol consumption [1]. Furthermore, there is a risk of Wernicks encephalopathy leading to Korsakoff Syndrome with alcohol abuse. This syndrome is a result of a thiamine, or

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vitamin B1 deficiency, often due to poor dietary habits. Thiamine deficiency results in slower memory function, the inability to remember events, and in some cases, extreme memory loss for periods of time.

Vitamin and Mineral Deficiencies

Aside from the increased risk of chronic disease due to poor dietary choices and the degeneration of the brain due to excess alcohol, those that regularly consume alcohol are more apt to have fat-soluble vitamin deficiencies (vitamins A, D, K, E)[4]. In addition, the minerals calcium, magnesium, and zinc, to name a few, tend to be low in those that consume excess alcohol [4].

1. https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/womens-health.htm

2. Erol A, Karpyak VM. Sex and gender-related differences in alcohol use and its consequences: Contemporary knowledge and future research considerations. Drug Alcohol Depend. 2015 Nov 1;156:1-13. doi: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2015.08.023. Epub 2015 Sep 5. PMID: 26371405.

3. Wang L, Lee I, Manson JE, Buring JE, Sesso HD. Alcohol Consumption, Weight Gain, and Risk of Becoming Overweight in Middle-aged and Older Women. *Arch Intern Med.* 2010;170(5):453–461. doi:10.1001/archinternmed.2009.527 https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/415737

4. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism No. 22 PH 346 October 1993 https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa22.htm

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