Women & Alcohol

A Delicate Balance

By Stacey Colino
THE NEXT TIME YOU PROPOSE A TOAST to your health over cocktails, you may want to think twice about what you’re saying. It turns out that consuming alcohol is a decidedly mixed blessing for aging women, depending on how much you drink. Middle-aged adults (between 45 and 65) who drink moderately have a lower mortality rate than teetotalers do, but heavy drinkers have a higher rate than moderate drinkers do, according to a comprehensive review recently published in The Journal of the American Dietetic Association. “Thus, alcohol can be considered either a tonic or a toxin in dose-dependent fashion,” the researchers noted.

Recent surveys suggest that more women are drinking—and that among those who do drink alcohol, women are drinking more than previous generations did. In some ways, heavy drinking is much riskier for women than for men, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). “Drink for drink, women generally tend to be more sensitive to the effects of alcohol than men are,” explains Shelly Greenfield, MD, MPH, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and an expert on alcohol and drug abuse. “This is partly because women’s bodies contain less total body water—they have more fat tissue—than men’s do and therefore the alcohol that is absorbed is more concentrated in women than in men.” Plus, a woman’s stomach lining contains less of an enzyme that breaks down alcohol before it’s absorbed by the bloodstream than a man’s does.

Many people don’t realize that both men and women develop an increased sensitivity and a decreased tolerance to alcohol as they get older. This is largely because as the decades pass the amount of water in the body decreases. As a result, smaller amounts of alcohol can have a bigger impact on body and mind.

Diana Collins (not her real name) has realized this firsthand. Though she was never a big drinker, recently she has noticed that when she has a glass of wine or the occasional margarita, “it goes right to my head in ways that it never did before,” says Collins, 50, of Venice, CA. “I end up feeling so woozy that I hardly drink anymore.”

“Women are already at increased vulnerability to the effects of alcohol, and this can be exacerbated as women age because aging reduces the capacity to metabolize alcohol for both men and women,” Greenfield explains. “So it’s almost as if you’re increasing your dose without taking in more. Having two glasses of wine can be more like having four glasses in the way you’re metabolizing it and the way it affects you.” In other words, as women get older they become even less tolerant than men are to the impact of alcohol. That’s why some experts are suggesting that perhaps the guidelines for moderate alcohol consumption should be lowered for postmenopausal women.
A Mixed Bag

There is, however, some evidence that moderate alcohol consumption—defined as one drink per day for women, two per day for men—can confer limited health benefits. For starters, moderate alcohol consumption has been found to protect cardiovascular health, which is significant because heart disease is the leading killer of women in the US, especially after menopause. Light-to-moderate drinking can also improve insulin sensitivity in those who don’t have diabetes (thereby reducing a person’s risk of developing type-2 diabetes), as well as lower the risk of age-related changes in memory and thinking abilities. The theory is that “it’s the alcohol-related increase in blood flow to the brain that may protect against age-related cognitive decline,” explains Frederic Blow, PhD, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor and an expert on alcohol and aging.

During the menopausal transition, consuming alcohol could be a mixed bag. In a recent study involving 438 midlife women, researchers at the University of Queensland in Australia found that women who were going through the menopausal transition and consumed alcohol at moderate levels had higher scores on measures of well-being than either nondrinkers or heavy drinkers did. On the other hand, drinking alcohol can make hot flashes and night sweats worse, says Diana L. Dell, MD, an assistant professor of psychiatry and obstetrics-gynecology at the Duke University Medical Center in Durham, NC.

While Nancy Backas used to be able to have three or four drinks over the course of an evening without any ill effects, now that she’s perimenopausal, having as few as two can worsen her hot flashes. “I’ve had as many as ten hot flashes while I was sleeping after a couple of glasses of red wine,” says Backas, 54, of Chicago. “I end up feeling way overheated and have to throw the covers off until the hot flash passes.” Then, the challenge becomes falling back asleep.

Indeed, “some people are exquisitely sensitive to the effects of alcohol, and even two glasses of wine will disturb their sleep,” Dell says. “There’s likely to be an additive effect: If you’re already having [menopause-related] sleep disturbances, alcohol may make it worse.” That’s because alcohol disrupts the architecture of sleep—the stages of sleep you normally pass through in the course of a night—which can cause you to sleep more lightly, awaken more easily than usual, and have trouble falling back to sleep. This can lead to fatigue the next day and make you more emotionally reactive to the stresses and hassles of everyday life.

What’s more, drinking alcohol can worsen any depression or anxiety a woman feels during the menopausal transition—or any other time. “Depression can increase drinking out of a desire for self-medication,” explains Alan Marlatt, PhD, a professor of psychology and director of the Addictive Behaviors Research Center at the University of Washington in Seattle. “There may be some short-term relief, but it can drive you more deeply into the depression long term. Alcohol has a biphasic effect: At first, it acts as a stimulant and you get a rush as your blood alcohol level starts to go up. But the more you drink, the more alcohol’s depressive effects kick in and you’ll end up feeling down.”

Risky Business

Imbibing more than moderate amounts of alcohol can have harmful long-term repercussions for your health. Heavy drinking (defined as five or more drinks on one occasion on five or more days in the past month) can increase the risks of head and neck cancers, raise the risk of high blood pressure, and compromise bone quality. “The risk of osteoporosis increases after menopause when estrogen levels fall, and that becomes
compounded by the effects of alcohol, which impairs new bone growth and disrupts the absorption of dietary calcium while increasing calcium excretion in urine; this results in less calcium being available for the bones,” explains Kathy Lustyk, PhD, a professor of psychology and principal investigator of the Women’s Health Lab at Seattle Pacific University. “So you can end up with a double whammy on bone during menopause.”

In both sexes, heavy alcohol consumption also increases the risk of developing liver disease and having accidents behind the wheel or on foot because alcohol impairs reaction time and judgment while driving and gait and stability while walking. “Drinking alcohol can affect your balance, and balance is already affected as you age,” Greenfield says. “So we worry about older women falling and breaking their hips, especially because the risk of osteoporosis increases after menopause.”

The age-related increase in sensitivity and decrease in tolerance to alcohol can be especially problematic for women since many postmenopausal women also take medications that can have adverse interactions with alcohol. In fact, more than 150 prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs can have negative interactions with alcohol. “As people get older, there’s an increased likelihood of taking prescribed medications—such as antidepressants for mood-related issues or narcotic analgesics for arthritis—and alcohol can interact with these in potentially dangerous ways,” says Greenfield.

The same is true if alcohol is used with some OTC drugs containing acetaminophen, which can lead to liver problems, and opioid drugs (such as OxyContin or Vicodin), which can decrease respiratory function if they’re taken with alcohol. Moreover, mixing alcohol and OTC sleep aids (like Unisom or Sominex) or prescription sleeping pills (like Ambien) is risky business because alcohol increases the sedative properties of these drugs. If you have certain medical conditions that become more common with advancing age, such as hypertension or diabetes, drinking alcohol could aggravate your condition or make it harder to control with medication.

All in Moderation
When it comes to deciding how much alcohol is healthy versus harmful, the answer is highly individual. “All the risks and benefits of alcohol consumption must be considered on an individual basis, based on your personal health risks, family risk factors, and your own drinking history,” Greenfield says. To reduce your chances of having alcohol-related health problems or accidents, pace yourself when you drink: Take small sips and don’t have more than one alcoholic beverage per hour; it also helps to alternate nonalcoholic beverages with alcoholic drinks. “To delay absorption, don’t drink on an empty stomach,” Blow advises. Have a meal or a snack before having a cocktail. And if you’re taking any medication, be sure to read the package label and package insert carefully—or talk to your doctor—to see if you should abstain from drinking alcohol altogether.
You’re Cut Off!

WHILE MORE MEN STRUGGLE with alcohol problems early in life, there’s some suggestion that women may be more likely to develop alcohol-abuse problems later in life than are men, according to the NIAAA. For many women, this happens after they’ve experienced multiple losses (such as the death of a spouse, retirement, declines in their health) or significant changes in life circumstances. “Two-thirds of people seen in treatment settings develop alcohol problems early in life and end up with more severe alcohol problems in their 50s or 60s,” Blow explains. “One-third of people seen in treatment settings develop alcohol problems later in life and end up with more severe alcohol problems in their 50s or 60s—80 percent of those are women.”

Here’s a checklist of some signs that your drinking could be putting you into the danger zone:

• At times you have felt that you should cut down on your alcohol intake.

• You’ve been finding that you need to drink more to get the desired effect.

• Other people have commented on your drinking in a concerned or critical way.

• You have felt guilty about your drinking from time to time.

• You often drink alcohol to help with sleep problems or to cope with anxious or depressed feelings.

• Sometimes you don’t remember conversations or things you did when you were drinking.

• There have been times when drinking alcohol has created problems for you at home, at work, or with friends.

If you think you should cut back, set clear limits for your drinking and try to have a few alcohol-free nights per week. “If you used to drink two drinks per day, start thinking about cutting back to one when you’re over 50,” Blow advises. “This Baby Boomer generation thinks they can maintain doing anything and not have any problems—but that’s not the case. You just can’t drink at the level you used to.”

To make cutting back easier, it helps to find new ways to socialize—by going out for coffee, a movie, or a workout with a friend—instead of meeting for drinks. Also, try to spend more time with friends who spend their free time doing fun activities that don’t involve alcohol. Instead of needing a cocktail to unwind, try another way to reduce stress. “One promising new treatment is practicing mindful meditation on a daily basis,” Marlatt says. “Not only does it reduce stress and anxiety—so there’s less need to self-medicate with alcohol—it also provides an opportunity to become mindful of the big picture and not to follow habitual, mindless drinking patterns.” If, despite your best efforts to cut back, you find that you just can’t get a grip on your drinking or your own, then it’s time to consider seeking help—from your doctor or a counselor.
Empty Calories

Let’s face it: Many women are counting calories to help control their weight but they likely aren’t taking into account the significant number of calories that alcohol contains. And they’re empty calories, meaning they offer no nutritional value. For example, 12 ounces of regular beer has 150-170 calories, a 5-ounce glass of wine contains about 120 calories, and an 8-ounce margarita packs around 540 calories. Those calories can quickly add up before you know it. Most people don’t compensate for those liquid calories by eating less, which means the additional calories that you’re drinking can easily lead to weight gain—and the age-related slowing of your metabolism doesn’t do anything to help that “thickening of the waist” that comes with midlife.

THE TRADE-OFFS

When it comes to the health-related tradeoffs of drinking alcohol or abstaining, the risks versus benefits depend in part on how much you’re consuming. Here’s a quick glance at how the health consequences of light, moderate, or heavy drinking compare to being a teetotaler for women (keep in mind this doesn’t take into account personal risks such as medication use or family history of alcohol problems or mental health conditions like depression or anxiety):

Light Drinking

- **Defined as:** Less than one drink per day
- **Benefits:**
  - Positive effects on bone density and insulin sensitivity
  - Helps protect against age-related cognitive decline
  - Reduced risk of death from all causes
- **Risks:**
  - Potential increased risk of breast and other cancers

Moderate Drinking

- **Defined as:** One drink per day
- **Benefits:**
  - Helps protect against heart disease
  - Positive effects on bone density and insulin sensitivity
  - Protects against age-related cognitive decline
  - Reduced risk of death from all causes
- **Risks:**
  - Increased risk of breast and other cancers

Heavy Drinking

- **Defined as:** Five or more drinks on one occasion or 5 or more days in the past month
- **Benefits:** None
- **Risks:**
  - Harmful effects on bone density; increased risk of fractures
  - Increased risk of breast and endometrial cancers
  - Increased risk of head and neck cancers
  - Increased risk of liver disease
  - Greater risk of accidents
  - Elevated risk of memory deficits
  - Increased risk of death from all causes

The Cancer Connection

Drinking alcohol can affect your risk of developing certain female cancers. For example, a large study from Britain recently indicated that imbibing as few as one or two drinks daily is associated with an increased risk of breast cancer. That’s because alcohol raises estrogen levels, regardless of age or whether you’re taking hormone therapy, says Anne McTiernan, MD, PhD, director of the Prevention Center at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. “Women with elevated blood estrogens have an increased risk for breast cancer because estrogen is a growth-promoter for the most common types of breast cancer.”

In addition, a recent study at the University of Southern California (USC) Keck School of Medicine found that women who consumed two or more drinks per day had twice the risk of endometrial cancer as nondrinkers. “The most plausible biological mechanism is related to alcohol’s impact on circulating estrogen levels,” says study lead author V. Wendy Setiawan, PhD, an assistant professor in the department of preventive medicine at USC. “Prolonged exposure to estrogens leads to increased proliferation of endometrial cells—potentially both normal cells and abnormal cells—resulting in increased DNA replication errors and mutations which can lead to cancer.”