

Women and Alcohol:

Key Recommendations

- **Minimize the impact of social stigma on addiction and recovery.** Design non-threatening public education messages on low-risk drinking which speaks to women in diverse circumstances.
- **Improve front line capacity to link women with information and services.** Incorporate alcohol-specific content in primary care and emergency training; adapt prenatal screening discussions to address alcohol use; and expand the Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse web-based *Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral* (SBIR) protocols.
- **Take a harm reduction approach.** Identify who is NOT accessing services and challenge providers to eliminate stigma as a barrier. Support policies which facilitate women who are marginalized to access housing, child care, and health care.

Recommendations for Health Service Planners and Providers

What needs to happen?

Alcohol consumption has different effects on women compared to men, and women tend to overuse alcohol for different reasons. Although gender-sensitive treatments for alcohol addiction - such as women-only residential treatment facilities - are available in some parts of Ontario, many regions are still not served by such programs. Service providers need to improve their capacity to serve women for whom alcohol is a problem.

Background

Alcohol consumption in Canada is rising in both sexes, but the gap in consumption between men and women is decreasing¹. For women in Ontario, daily drinking has increased from 2.6% in 2001 to 5.3% in 2007, and hazardous or harmful drinking increased from 5% in 1998 to 8% in 2007². Yet, the effects of alcohol on both sexes is not equal: women metabolize alcohol less efficiently than men³, alcohol can interrupt a woman's reproductive cycle⁴ and cause fetal abnormalities in pregnancy⁵, and alcohol consumption can increase a woman's risk of disease (e.g. breast cancer)⁶. Women may consume alcohol to cope with experience of violence or abuse, and excessive alcohol consumption (by women and men) may put women at risk for assault⁷. Compared to men, high alcohol consumption has a harsher impact on women's physical, social, and emotional well-being, and is linked to mental illness in women⁸. Considering that in Ontario, alcohol is associated with costs exceeding \$5 billion in health care⁹, enforcement and lost productivity, it is clear there are serious social and economic ramifications to the increase in alcohol consumption for both men and women.

Approach

Echo: Improving Women's Health in Ontario brought together knowledgeable practice leaders from across the province to serve as an Expert Panel¹⁰ on alcohol use by women. The purpose of bringing these leaders together was to develop a shared understanding of the current state of knowledge and best practices particularly regarding treatment services for women with problematic alcohol use in Ontario.

Key Findings

For many women, the risk of addiction and prospects for recovery are complicated by other life factors. A particularly high risk of alcohol addiction and/or poor treatment outcomes is borne by: women who have experienced or are experiencing violence¹¹; women with a family history of addiction¹²; women with concurrent conditions such as mental health issues¹³; LGBT populations¹⁴; young women, who as a population are consuming more alcohol than in the past¹⁵; Aboriginal women, who live with the impact of colonialism, cultural genocide, and violence¹⁶; ethnic and/or racial minority women, who cope with discrimination or feelings of isolation¹⁷. These are rarely distinct 'categories'; many women may be at even greater risk as they cope with multiple, intersecting, marginalizing life circumstances. Some social consequences are more damaging than others and may actually hamper the possibility of recovery. For example, single mothers who use alcohol may be subject to social stigma, but may be too afraid to seek treatment, as disclosing may result in their children being taken from them¹⁶. Stigma is a major barrier for women needing treatment for alcohol misuse and interferes with women seeking help.

Key Recommendations Continued

To combat stigma and related barriers to seeking treatment, both women and service providers need to be more knowledgeable about alcohol consumption, its effects, and its treatment. The Expert Panel recommended non-threatening, public education messages targeted to women in diverse circumstances. They also pointed to the necessity to build front line capacity; gatekeeper training should increase earlier intervention and treatment, and recognize the link between violence, substance abuse, and mental health. The Expert Panel recommended a public health approach that focuses on harm reduction versus abstinence, and provides cross-sectoral support for program access including transportation, child care, and health care costs. Better primary care interventions - particularly for young women, whose drinking patterns are increasing and may be putting them at risk for violence or reproductive health issues - should be prioritized as an area for improvement in the province.

Echo appreciates the opportunity to work with partners and community women to advance women's health in Ontario. For more information, please contact Mavis Jones by email at mjones@echo-ontario.ca or by phone at 416-597-9687 ext. 235.

References

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About Echo: Improving Women's Health in Ontario

Echo: Improving Women's Health in Ontario is an agency of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. Our vision is improved health and well-being and reduced health inequities for Ontario women. For more information, please go to www.echo-ontario.ca.

Echo's Expert Panel on Women and Alcohol

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