

# Cut down your drinking

## The rules for women

**T**he most common reasons women drink too much are anxiety, loneliness and boredom, says psychologist Dr Mary Ellen Barnes. The usual drink of choice is wine. "I'd say 96 per cent of the women we see drink chardonnay and for the rest it's vodka, beer and red wine," her colleague Dr Ed Wilson adds.

For the past ten years women from all over the world, including the UK, have sought help for their drinking problems from the two psychologists who practice in Rolling Hills Estates in Los Angeles. The doctors are on the frontline of the female drinking epidemic in the US. Most of the women they treat are aged between 40 and 55.

Women drinkers fall into two categories, they say. A few are alcohol dependent and start having withdrawal symptoms the minute they quit drinking. Most of the women they see are alcohol abusers and will be able to get their drinking under control if they really want to. Some even find it easy once they start.

They say it is unhelpful to generalise alcohol abuse. "It's a mosaic, with a spectrum, just like any other condition," says Dr Wilson. "There's no one-size-fits-all problem or treatment. Everybody's triggers and risk factors are different."

The psychologists say the CAGE test is a useful exercise to help women determine if they are drinking too much.

C. Have you ever felt you should **cut** down your drinking?

A. Have people **annoyed** you by criticising your drinking?

G. Have you ever felt **guilty** about your drinking?

E. The **eye-opener**. Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover?

If you say "yes" to two answers, you could have a drinking problem; if you say "yes" to three or more then you definitely have a drinking problem.

Answering "yes" to these questions also indicates you have a problem:

1) Do you plan your day around your favorite drinking time?

2) Do you usually pick restaurants based on their wine list or whether they have a full bar, rather than the food, ambiance and company?

3) Do you take alcohol with you when you travel, just in case?

Their advice to help women get their drinking under control is:

Eat something before you go home from work that will help your blood sugar rise, so you don't walk in the door tired and your blood sugar is so low that wine is "screaming for you to come and get it".

Be active and engaged in life. Happy people do not develop alcohol problems. "For women, or men for that matter, alcohol problems generally mean that something is not working in their lives," says Dr Barnes. "Women may not know how to handle stress, or perhaps they are not assertive in their relationships and

therefore feel unheard, powerless and frustrated in their marriage. Maybe they are bored, or lonely. The thing women need to understand is that alcohol abuse is the symptom not the primary problem. Of course, if the alcohol problem gets too bad, or goes on for too many years, it can become a huge problem itself. But generally, when a woman addresses what isn't working, then she can more easily conquer the alcohol problem."

Plan activities to relieve stress in the early evening when you might be tempted to start drinking. Go to the gym, do yoga, go out for a run, or go to the cinema or the theatre. If you are menopausal or perimenopausal, think about getting some HRT if you find your alcohol consumption increasing due to hormonal/menopausal symptoms.

Changing behaviour patterns is crucial, they say. "Let's say my pattern is that I walk in the door, get the wine, kick off my shoes, flip on the TV and watch the news," explains Dr Barnes. "If I'm worried I'm drinking too much, I might grab a cranberry juice instead of a glass of wine but I'm doing 99 per cent of a behaviour pattern and leaving out the one per cent that is my favourite. That doesn't work."

Women should not despair if they fall off the wagon. Dr Barnes explains: "It's like losing 50lbs. You're dieting, changing your habits and eating patterns, exercising more, and then the holidays come along and you're going to all these parties and you gain three pounds. But you've still lost 47lbs, so right after the holidays you get back on your eating and exercise plan. With alcohol, it's the same thing. I've had people call me in a panic to say they've had two drinks. Big deal. They were having a bad day and they flipped back into using alcohol as self-medication. You learn from it and move on."

Women generally start looking better as soon as they stop drinking. "The puffiness in their faces goes away within the week, they get that healthy glow back in their skin within a month. Their eyes start to sparkle again. It really is a great way to lose 10 years off your face in about 30 days," says Dr Barnes.

At their centre, the psychologists do intense, one-on-one treatment, which may involve a course of a craving-suppressing drug. They keep track of women for a year after they have finished treatment.

The psychologists say about 65 per cent of women are happy with the results, whether it is drinking moderately or abstaining. Of the rest, half report that they are still struggling with alcohol and the other half have disappeared.

The most common outcome is that women who want to moderate their drinking end up giving it up completely.

Dr Barnes says: "We see a lot of women who quit for a while, get their lives under control, and then say, 'You know what? I'm happy without the booze. I don't want to risk going back there.'"

**Barbara McMahon**

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