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The newest challenge for women in the workplace:  
**Women and Alcohol Addiction**



// The stresses of work, coupled with those related to COVID-19, have helped create an undesirable distinction for women: they now comprise the fastest-growing population of alcohol users in the U.S.

Despite changes in workforce composition as a result of the pandemic, women have made great strides in the workplace. As of December 2019, women held 50.4 percent of positions.

But the stresses of work, coupled with those related to COVID-19, have helped create an undesirable distinction for women: they now comprise the fastest-growing population of alcohol users in the U.S.

Unfortunately, this new designation comes with an increased risk of developing short-and long-term physical and mental health issues that plague female alcohol consumers and significantly impact employers, employees and families.

## A Growing Problem

**Women now drink as much as men.**

For nearly a century, women have been closing the gender gap relative to alcohol consumption, binge drinking and alcohol use disorder. But a study that examined changes in drinking patterns between 2002 and 2013 sponsored by the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) found substantial increases in women and problematic drinking trends, noting that the frequency of alcohol use disorder (AUD) among women increased 83.7 percent.

The same study also revealed that high-risk drinking – defined as consuming more than three drinks per day or seven in a week for women – has increased by about 58 percent.

In addition, there has been a steep rise in alcohol-related emergency room visits between 2006 and 2014, with women leading the increase.



The pandemic has further elevated the rates of alcohol use among women, including a 41 percent rise in heavy drinking days, according to a RAND Corporation study. And, additional research has shown that women are especially susceptible to increasing alcohol use in response to the psychological stresses related to COVID-19.

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## Factors Fueling this Increase

Aside from the pandemic, there are various factors responsible for the rise in the consumption and misuse of alcohol among women. These include:

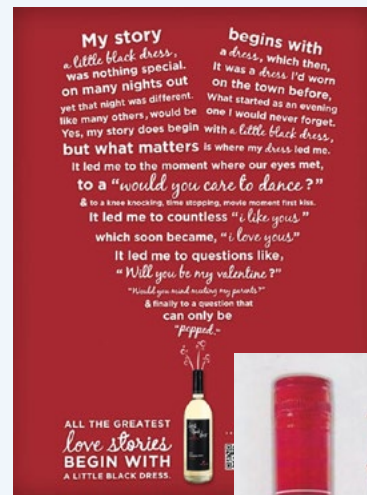
- External stressors - Women between the ages of 25 and 34 (the age span that encompasses the highest modern rates of alcohol use) face career-related external pressures, workforce demands and difficulties in transitioning from college to the real world.
- Continued family expectations - While men are becoming more involved in caregiver roles, women still carry the onus of domestic responsibilities. For example, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that mothers take on a greater share of tasks, including facilitating their children's education and a number of household responsibilities. This is especially true of women who work remotely.

This dynamic is consistent with literature from sociologist Arlie Hochschild, in which women were found to work a "second shift." After they completed their day of paid work, they then spent another full shift doing work at home supporting children, families and home tasks. The pandemic has exacerbated this.

**"A cultural shift has made it not only more acceptable but also more attractive to drink."**

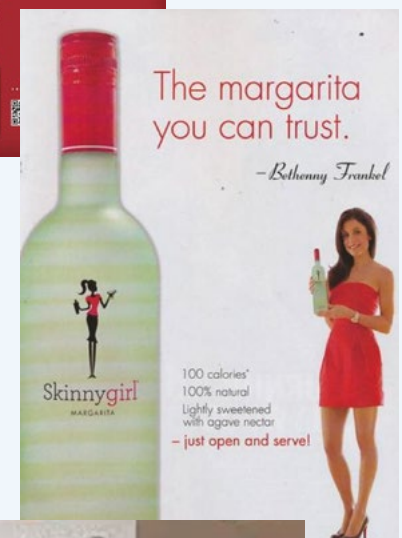
- Changing cultural norms and confusing societal messages about women and alcohol - Pop culture seems to celebrate women who drink rather than warn against its dangers. Just take a look at some of the advertising that celebrates drinking and targets women. A cultural shift has made it not only more acceptable but also more attractive to drink. And brands are developed and marketed specifically to women, such as Little Black Dress wine and Skinny Girl Vodka, promoted as "a whole new way to cocktail with low-calorie alcoholic drinks."

Brands are developed and marketed specifically to women.



Ad for Little Black Dress wine

Ad for Skinny Girl Margarita



Display Ad in Trader Joes for Back to School Supplies - promoting wine as a necessary supply for home schooling.



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## Women are at Higher Risk of Alcohol Misuse

Although men are more likely to drink alcohol and consume larger amounts than women, biological differences in body structure and body chemistry cause women to absorb more alcohol and take longer to metabolize it.

Key structural and biochemical differences that make alcohol more problematic for women include the following:

- **Women weigh less and their bodies contain less water and more fat than men's bodies.** Alcohol resides predominantly in body water and pound-for-pound, women have less water in their bodies than men. And, fat doesn't absorb alcohol, so women absorb more alcohol, pound for pound, than men. In fact, a woman's body absorbs 30 percent more alcohol after drinking the same amount as a man, according to the Office of Alcohol and Drug Education at the University of Notre Dame. Women also end up with a higher blood alcohol concentration as well.

A woman's body absorbs

**30% more alcohol**

after drinking the same amount as a man.

- **Women's bodies take longer to metabolize alcohol,** the result of gender differences in gastric acid activity and reduced levels of dehydrogenase, a digestive enzyme that helps break down alcohol. This is also why women become more intoxicated more quickly after drinking the same amount as men.
- **Hormonal factors** may make women more susceptible to the effects of alcohol. For example, using birth control pills, as well as menstruation or ovulation, can all slow a women's alcohol metabolism and lead to higher blood alcohol concentrations.

- **Psychological factors** can also be an issue in how women's bodies react to alcohol. Women are twice as likely as men to have anxiety disorder, which is partially responsible for the high rates of alcohol misuse among females. Women are more likely to describe their motivation for alcohol use as a means of "taking the edge off." And, women experience unique, gender-based societal pressures that contribute to feelings of anxiety. The same connection can be found between alcohol use and depression, with women at heightened risk for self-medicating negative moods such as depression with alcohol.



- Women are more likely to endure **chronic pain** than men, which could cause them to self-medicate with alcohol.
- While men typically drink alcohol to enhance positive feelings, women more frequently drink **in response to negative emotions, anxiety or stress.** In addition, trauma, abuse, social isolation, prolonged stress, and "negative affect" (a state of emotional stress characterized by "bad" feelings such as anxiety, fear, anger, irritability and sadness) are all predictive of alcohol misuse and associated with rising rates of AUD in women.
- **Stress** may play a significant role in initiating and maintaining alcohol use in women. In one study, women who had two or more past year stressful life events were four times more likely to have a new onset AUD than men.

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- **How early in life a person starts drinking** can also predict future alcohol use. In this case, gender differences have shifted significantly. Male drinking used to far surpass female drinking at all levels from eight to 12th grades. Over the past 20 years though, females in their teens and early twenties reported drinking and getting drunk at higher rates than their male peers – in some cases, for the first time since researchers began measuring such behavior.
- **Victimization**, a term used to describe the presence of abuse in a woman’s life, appears to be a significant risk factor for AUD in women.
- Alcohol (and other substance use) in women tends to **develop into an addiction** more quickly than in men.

## Short-and Long-Term Health Impacts and Complications

Some studies suggest that women who begin to engage in risky drinking behaviors such as binge drinking are up to twice as likely to develop AUD, along with a number of short-and long-term health issues and complications.

Although alcohol use may put women at greater risk than men for long-term health problems that have a greater potential health impact, the more immediate affects of alcohol use and misuse can be serious as well. They include:

- Cognitive impairment
- Falls, which are especially concerning for older women
- Fetal impact - any amount of drinking during pregnancy can be harmful. Prenatal alcohol exposure can result in physical, cognitive and behavioral problems in children, any of which can be components of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Drinking during pregnancy also can increase the risk for pre-term labor.
- Sexual assault - Binge drinking is a risk factor
- Sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies



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## Long-Term Health Risks

Women are more likely than men to suffer from significant, long-term health issues when consuming less amounts of alcohol. These include:

### Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD)

AUD is a chronic relapsing brain disorder characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use, despite adverse social, occupational or health consequences. AUD can range from mild to severe. Fortunately, recovery is possible, regardless of its severity.

### Liver Damage

Women are more susceptible to liver disease than men, and women experience a faster progression to cirrhosis (permanent liver scarring) over a shorter period of time.

Also, women who misuse alcohol are more likely than men who consume the same amount to develop alcoholic hepatitis, a potentially fatal alcohol-related liver condition. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has not yet compiled data on any overall increase in hospitalizations from alcoholic liver disease (ALD) since the pandemic, anecdotal information gleaned from the medical community describes the increase as “astronomical” and “off the charts.”

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More than 44,000 people died of ALD in 2019 in the U.S. Although it still affects more men than women, younger women are driving the increase in deaths. This trend began several years ago and is now exacerbated by the pandemic. A troubling omen is that doctors are seeing people in their twenties and thirties with a disease that was previously thought of as exclusive to middle age. And, while ALD usually takes years to manifest, it can become a threat for women more quickly because their bodies process alcohol differently than men.

Since the pandemic, the % of women with alcoholic liver disease is off the charts.

## Heart Disease

Long-term alcohol misuse is a leading cause of heart disease, and women are more prone than men to developing alcohol-related heart disease, even though they may consume less alcohol than men over their lifetime.

## Brain Damage

Research suggests that alcohol misuse produces brain damage more quickly in women than in men. Women may also be more susceptible to alcohol-related blackouts, which are gaps in a person's memory for events that occurred while they were intoxicated. Blackouts occur when a person drinks enough alcohol to temporarily block the transfer of memories from short-to long-term storage - a process known as memory consolidation - in the hippocampus, the area of the brain that plays a major role in memory and learning.

## Breast Cancer

Over the past few years in particular, researchers have made an association between alcohol consumption and the development of breast cancer. Women who have three alcoholic drinks per week have a 15 percent higher risk of breast cancer when compared to women who don't drink at all. It is estimated that this risk



Women who consume 3 alcoholic drinks per week have a 15% higher risk of breast cancer.

increases 10 percent for each additional drink women regularly have each day. This increase can partially be explained by the fact that alcohol raises estrogen levels in the body.

## Other long-term health risks include:

- Infertility
- Bone loss
- Malnutrition
- Hypertension
- Obesity
- Alcohol-impaired accidents

Both men and women who heavily use alcohol display an increased likelihood of other substance abuse, antisocial personality disorder, phobic disorder, major depression, panic disorder and somatization compared with the general population, according to one study. However, 65 percent of women who heavily use alcohol were more likely to have these conditions as opposed to 44 percent of men who abused alcohol.

## Alcohol's Impact on the Workplace

Across the U.S., employers spend between \$33 billion and \$68 billion annually as a result of employee alcohol misuse and alcoholism. This includes absenteeism, health complications, on-the-job injuries and other losses in productivity.

21% of workers

have to work longer hours as a result of a colleagues drinking problem.

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An employee who is struggling with alcohol addiction impacts others around them in addition to their own health and well-being, including supervisors, coworkers and project team members. An estimated 21 percent of workers reported having to re-do a project, or work additional hours as the result of a colleague's drinking problem. And workplace absenteeism is between three and eight times greater among heavy drinkers, compared to social or nondrinkers.

## How can Employers Help Female Employees with Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD)

Employers are in a unique position to provide their workforce, families and communities with the support necessary to improve the well-being of their workers. While the task is not an easy one, it is vital to protecting the investments they've made in their business, brand and employees.

One of the most important things employers can do to be proactive in addressing alcohol misuse and addiction is to educate themselves on the unique risks of their employee population and determine the best course of action to support their specific needs.

### Provide information and access to the right care

– Research has shown that combining addiction treatment with therapy ensures the best chance of success for most patients with substance use disorders. The most effective of these therapies include:

### Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT)

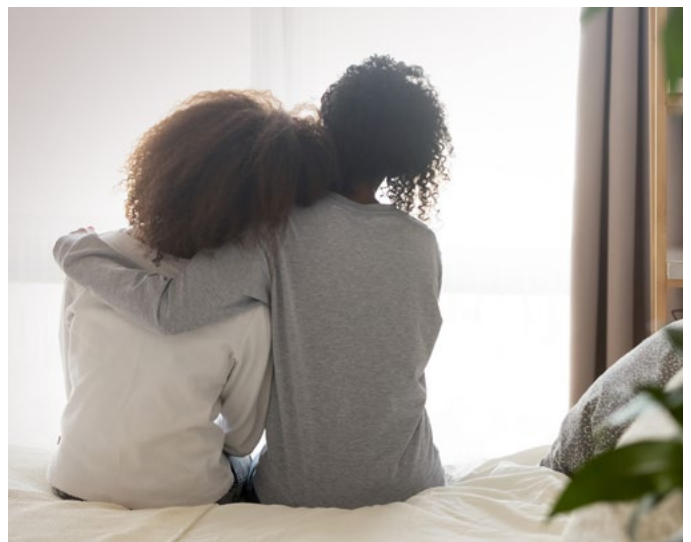
Medication-Assisted Treatment provides a “whole patient” approach to treat substance use disorders. It combines the use of FDA-approved medications with counseling and behavioral therapies. MAT programs are clinically driven and tailored to meet the needs of each patient. While a combination of medication and therapy can successfully treat substance use disorders, for some, MAT can also help sustain recovery.

Proven to be clinically effective for significantly reducing the need for inpatient detoxification, MAT provides a more comprehensive, individually tailored program of medication and behavioral therapy that addresses the needs of most patients.

### Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy helps those battling addiction address problematic thoughts and feelings. Widely-used in addiction treatment today, CBT teaches recovering addicts how to find connections between their thoughts, feelings and actions, and helps increase awareness of the things that impact recovery.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy helps employees overcome alcohol addiction.

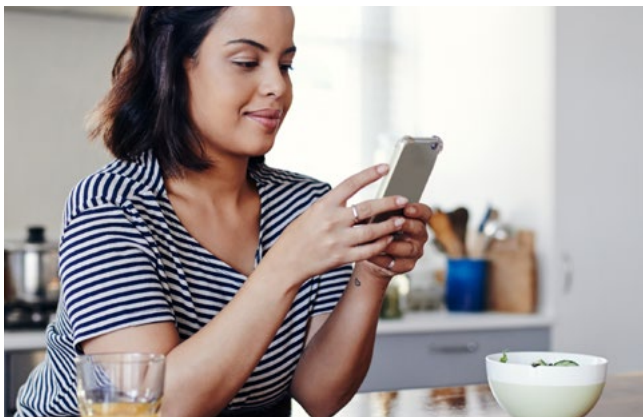




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## *CBT helps patients overcome alcohol addiction by:*

- Helping recognize and change irrational beliefs that led to their problematic substance use and maintains it
- Providing self-help tools to improve their moods
- Providing skills training in an array of healthy coping strategies to replace alcohol use
- Teaching effective communications skills



## Digital Solutions

Considering that employees today operate out of multiple locations across the country and the globe – including a significant number of remote workers – comprehensive solutions that employ both MAT and CBT can be delivered digitally to best serve the modern distributed workforce. The ideal digital solution is one that combines technology, healthcare and design, and provides programs that are tailored to the individual employee’s specific needs.

**Digital addiction solutions can help track outcomes, enable accurate reporting and flag high-risk individuals to ensure they are getting the right support when needed.**

Comprehensive digital solutions that support employees with alcohol use disorders include interactions with a consistent recovery coach who evaluates, personalizes and holds members accountable to their individual recovery goals. They might also provide anonymous peer group support that is moderated by a recovery coach. Digital addiction solutions can help track outcomes, enable accurate reporting and flag high-risk individuals to ensure they are getting the right support when needed.

## Offering Help is Key

Women are not only drinking more; they’re being significantly impacted by it, both physically and mentally. Perhaps even more concerning is that the rising gender equality in alcohol use doesn’t extend to the recognition or treatment of alcohol disorders in women. And the four million American women who suffer from alcohol misuse and dependence are less likely than men to get the help they need.



“ Many women who are pregnant or have young children do not seek treatment.”

It can be difficult for women to get help for a substance use problem during or after pregnancy because of social or legal fears. They may also lack childcare while in treatment. Many women who are pregnant or have young children do not seek treatment or drop out of treatment early because they are unable to take care of their children; they may also fear that authorities will remove their children from their care.



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While traditional treatment for AUD doesn't typically place importance on gender differences that factor into addiction, some evidence shows that treatment that better supports women struggling with an AUD may be more successful. Effective treatment should incorporate approaches that recognize sex and gender differences, understand the types of trauma women sometimes face, and use evidence-based approaches for the treatment of pregnant women. Digital solutions can help women overcome some of their role-specific barriers to accessing care by increasing convenience, for example, the ability to receive text support and telemedicine treatment while at home.



**Employers can play a key role in helping stem the tide of female alcohol use and addiction.**

As women continue to comprise increasing segments of the workforce, employers can play a key role in helping stem the tide of female alcohol use and addiction. The combined burdens of work, home care, childcare, and other family responsibilities, plus attending treatment frequently, can be overwhelming for many women. Successful treatment may need to provide an increased level of support to address these needs. A program that is tailored to the individual will help women manage the specific triggers and issues that are driving their alcohol use.

## Quit Genius, the world's first digital clinic for multiple addictions.

Quit Genius is revolutionizing the delivery of addiction treatment. Quit Genius has helped over 750,000 people improve their lives and quit their addictions. Quit Genius delivers digital addiction solutions to employers, health plans and members.

The Quit Genius digital addiction benefit solution includes:



Addiction Care Navigator to analyze and assess each employee, ensuring they get access to a tailored treatment program



Physician-led care team to prescribe appropriate medications and monitor adherence



Digital Medication-Assisted Treatment program for smoking, alcohol and opioid addictions



Personalized digital Cognitive Behavioral Therapy journey for employees, delivered via Quit Genius mobile app



On-demand digital behavioral health coaching



Connected device to help validate program adherence



Relapse prevention tools



Anonymous peer support



Value-based payment model

**Visit [quitgenius.com](https://quitgenius.com) today to speak with an addiction solutions expert.**