

RISK FACTORS FOR WOMEN Source: NIAAA

*See source (<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa46.htm>) for references cited throughout text.

Factors that may increase women's risk for alcohol abuse or dependence include genetic influences, early initiation of drinking, and victimization.

Genetic Factors

- ❖ The relative contribution of genetic factors to women's risk for alcoholism has been debated.
- ❖ A survey of 2,163 female twins revealed greater similarity between identical twins compared with fraternal twins on measures of alcohol consumption (31)*.
- ❖ Similar studies including more than 12,000 twin pairs from the general population have confirmed that among both male and female twin pairs, identical twins are more likely than fraternal twins to have similar rates of alcohol dependence, alcohol abuse, and heavy alcohol consumption (32, 33)*.
- ❖ Studies of women who had been adopted at birth have shown a significant association between alcoholism in adoptees and their biological parents (34)*.
- ❖ In addition, antisocial personality (e.g., aggressiveness) in biological parents may predict alcoholism in both male and female adoptees (35).
- ❖ Potential interactions between genetic and environmental influences require further study.

Age of Initiating Drinking

- ❖ Results of a large nationwide survey show that more than 40 percent of persons who initiated drinking before age 15 were diagnosed as alcohol dependent at some point in their lives (37)*.
- ❖ Rates of lifetime dependence declined to approximately 10 percent among those who began drinking at age 20 or older. The annual rate of this decline was similar for both genders (37)*.
- ❖ Although in the past women generally started drinking at later ages than men, more recent survey data show that this difference has nearly disappeared (2)*.

Victimization

- ❖ Using data collected in a large general population survey, Wilsnack and colleagues (38)* found that women who reported being sexually abused in childhood were more likely than other women to have experienced alcohol-related problems (e.g., family discord or household accidents) and to have one or more symptoms of alcohol dependence.
- ❖ Another study found that women in alcoholism treatment were significantly more likely to report childhood sexual abuse and father-to-daughter verbal aggression or physical violence compared with women in the general population (39)*.
- ❖ Widom and colleagues (40)* reached a different conclusion from that of Miller and colleagues. Instead of relying on women's recall of their pasts, Widom and colleagues consulted court records to identify cases of childhood physical or sexual abuse. These researchers found that for women, a history of childhood



neglect, but not abuse, significantly predicted the number of alcohol-related symptoms experienced, independent of parental alcohol or other drug (AOD) problems, childhood poverty, race, and age.

- ❖ Physical abuse during adulthood has also been associated with women's alcohol use and related problems. One study found that significantly more women undergoing alcoholism treatment experienced severe partner violence (e.g., kicking, punching, or threatening with a weapon) compared with other women in the community.
- ❖ In addition, among women in the community group, those with AOD-related problems reported significantly higher rates of severe partner violence than women without such problems. Although the findings indicate that partner violence and AOD problems co-occur among women, the data do not indicate whether the association is causal (41)*.