

# Women's Health and Alcohol

Briefing for Motion S6M-15382 12 November 2024

## Summary

- The Women's Health Plan prioritises three key areas – Abortion, Sexual Health and Pre-pregnancy; Menopause and Menstrual Health; and Heart Health. Each of these aspects of health are affected by alcohol.
- 1,000 women die from alcohol each year in Scotland, with alcohol responsible for 1 in 8 deaths from breast cancer amongst 35–64-year-olds.
- Alcohol impacts reproductive health with links to several conditions impacting the menstrual cycle, fertility and pregnancy.
- Age is also an important factor in exacerbating alcohol harm in women, as we know menopause can affect women's overall quality of life and expose them to increased health risks. Women are more likely to use alcohol as a coping mechanism and should receive advice on the effects of alcohol on their menopausal symptoms.
- There is evidence of alcohol marketing targeting women and perpetuating gender stereotypes as well as increasing women's consumption of alcohol. Restrictions on alcohol marketing would reduce consumption and lessen the social pressure on women to drink.
- Mandating the inclusion of drinking guidelines, health warnings and calorie content on alcohol labels is a simple and effective way to communicate health information and address the limited awareness of alcohol harms.

## Alcohol harm and women

Alcohol consumption remains far too high in Scotland. Around one in four (22%) people and **1 in 6 women report drinking at hazardous or harmful levels**, defined as exceeding the UK Chief Medical Officers' weekly drinking guideline of 14 units per week.<sup>1</sup> Although fewer women than men drink at these levels, evidence suggests that many of the effects of alcohol pose a greater risk to women's physical health at a lower consumption level than men's.<sup>2</sup>

**One third of the deaths from alcohol are experienced by women, with over 1,000 women losing their lives each year.**<sup>3</sup> The rate of women dying from an alcohol-specific condition has gradually increased over the last decade.<sup>4</sup> A large proportion of alcohol-related deaths are from cancers; for example, **alcohol is responsible for around 1 in 8 female deaths from breast cancer** in Scotland for those aged 35-64 year olds.<sup>5</sup>

## Reproductive Health and Pregnancy

Alcohol has several impacts on reproductive health, specifically being linked to menstrual cycle dysfunction, earlier menopause and worse outcomes from assisted reproductive technology (ART).<sup>6</sup>

In a recent study, 42% of babies had been exposed to alcohol in pregnancy in Scotland, with the UK experiencing the fourth highest rate of prenatal alcohol exposure in the world. 15% of pregnancies in Scotland that are exposed to alcohol involve high and frequent consumption. Alcohol at any stage of pregnancy risks the child developing a neurodevelopmental disorder. However, over a quarter (28%) of women in the UK are unaware of this advice.<sup>7</sup> Awareness of the weekly drinking guideline to keep risks to their own health low is even poorer, at 23%.<sup>8</sup> Action is needed to better identify and support people affected by conditions like FASD – a largely preventable condition arising from exposure to alcohol in pregnancy.

The Women's Health Plan refers to the development of a Framework for pre-pregnancy care and raising awareness of the importance of optimising health before pregnancy. This Framework should be coupled with policy actions such as statutory health warnings on alcohol labels, and restrictions on alcohol marketing, to reduce alcohol harm.

## Alcohol and Aging

A recent study has highlighted that women are especially vulnerable to alcohol's negative health consequences which might be exacerbated with age<sup>9</sup>. There is little reference to this in the Women's Health Plan, despite suggestions from research that women should receive advice on the effects of alcohol on their menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, heart palpitations, as well as sleep, sexual and bone health.<sup>10</sup> This should be part of the holistic approach to menopause care referred to in the plan.

There is also a risk of women using alcohol to self-medicate to cope with their menopause symptoms, given the established links between mental ill-health and alcohol use. It has been found that women experience higher levels of stress and are more likely to use alcohol as a coping mechanism - such motives to drink are strongly associated with more severe alcohol use.<sup>11</sup>

## Mandatory health information on labels

The Women's Health Plan is very clear that informing women about their health is one of the most important actions that can be taken. Currently public awareness of alcohol harm is limited, for example 1 in 2 people don't know that alcohol causes cancer<sup>12</sup>, and 77% don't know the weekly drinking guidelines<sup>13</sup>. By including health warnings and information on alcohol products, it will help make this happen.

Studies suggest that including health warnings on alcohol labels would raise awareness of health risks and may encourage reduced consumption.<sup>14</sup> Specific warnings, such as for cancer, were found to be particularly effective. For example, a Canadian intervention found that prominent labels with drinking guidelines, a cancer warning, and unit information led to increased awareness and knowledge of drinking guidelines<sup>15</sup> and alcohol's role in causing cancer,<sup>16</sup> as well as a 6.3% reduction in consumption.<sup>17</sup>

There is public support for health information to be mandated on alcohol labels, including the number of units; a pregnancy warning; nutritional information; ingredients list; health conditions caused by alcohol such as cancer, liver disease and dependency.<sup>18</sup>

The Scottish Government committed in their Alcohol Framework in 2018 that they "...will press alcohol producers to place health information on physical product and packaging labels – and will be prepared to consider pursuing a mandatory approach in Scotland if the UK Government's deadline of September 2019 is not met."<sup>19</sup> However, no action has been taken on alcohol labelling by either the Scottish or UK Government to deliver on these commitments.

## Action on gendered alcohol marketing

The social media campaign #Don'tPinkMyDrink has drawn attention to the use of gender stereotypes in the ways alcohol is marketed to women by alcohol producers and retailers. The creation of new products which often taste sweeter; using lifestyle messages to promote 'bloat resistant' products; and emphasising slimness are all gendered ways that alcohol is marketed to women.<sup>20</sup>

Introducing statutory restrictions on how heavily and attractively alcohol is marketed would reduce consumption and lessen the social pressure on women to drink. The display and promotion of alcohol products in shops is often prominent and visible, further increasing accessibility and impulse purchasing. Restricting alcohol marketing is recommended by the World Health Organization as one of the most effective ways of reducing consumption and the health and social harms alcohol causes.

An analysis of consultation responses on marketing by the Scottish Government in 2023 showed that public health and third sector organisations were consistently in favour of restrictions on alcohol advertising, promotion and sponsorship.<sup>21</sup>

## About Alcohol Focus Scotland

[Alcohol Focus Scotland \(AFS\)](#) is the national charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol harm. We want to see fewer people have their health damaged or lives cut short due to alcohol, fewer children and families suffering as a result of other people's drinking, and communities free from alcohol-related crime and violence.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Birtwhistle, S. et al. (2023). [The Scottish Health Survey 2022 – volume 1: main report](#). Scottish Government.
- <sup>2</sup> Institute of Alcohol Studies (2020). [Women and Alcohol](#).
- <sup>3</sup> National Records of Scotland (2024). [Alcohol-specific deaths 2023](#).
- <sup>4</sup> National Records of Scotland (2024). [Alcohol-specific deaths 2023](#).
- <sup>5</sup> In 2020, the latest year for which estimates are available. Taken from Public Health Scotland (2024). [Alcohol Consumption and Harms Dashboard](#).
- <sup>6</sup> Van Heertum, K. & Rossi, B. (2017) Alcohol and fertility: how much is too much? *Fertility Research and Practice*, 3(1), 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Alcohol Health Alliance (2018) [How we think, what we drink](#).
- <sup>8</sup> Online survey of 1,126 adults aged 18+ in Scotland conducted 29 February to 18 March 2024 by YouGov on behalf of Action on Smoking and Health. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in Scotland (aged 18+).
- <sup>9</sup> Shihab, S., Islam, N., Kanani, D., Marks, L., & Vegunta, S. (2024). Alcohol use at midlife and in menopause: a narrative review. *Maturitas*, 108092.
- <sup>10</sup> Shihab, S., Islam, N., Kanani, D., Marks, L., & Vegunta, S. (2024). Alcohol use at midlife and in menopause: a narrative review. *Maturitas*, 108092.
- <sup>11</sup> Timko, C., Finney, J. W., & Moos, R. H. (2005). The 8-year course of alcohol abuse: gender differences in social context and coping. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 29(4), 612-621.
- <sup>12</sup> Whitelock, V., (2023) Cancer Research UK's September 2023 Cancer Awareness Measure 'Plus' (CAM+)
- <sup>13</sup> Online survey of 12,247 adults aged 18+ in Great Britain, of which 1,021 were in Scotland. Survey conducted 18 February to 18 March 2021 by YouGov on behalf of Action on Smoking and Health. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+). 23% of people accurately stated that the weekly low risk drinking guideline was 14 units per week; 48% inaccurately estimated the guideline and 29% said they did not know.
- <sup>14</sup> Hobin, E. et al. (2022). [Enhanced Alcohol Container Labels: A Systematic Review](#). Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction.
- <sup>15</sup> Schoueri-Mychasiw, N. et al. (2020). Examining the impact of alcohol labels on awareness and knowledge of national drinking guidelines: A real-world study in Yukon, Canada. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 81(2), 262-272.
- <sup>16</sup> Hobin, E. et al. (2020). Testing alcohol labels as a tool to communicate cancer risk to drinkers: A real-world quasi-experimental study. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 81(2), 249-261.
- <sup>17</sup> Zhao, J. et al. (2020). The effects of alcohol warning labels on population alcohol consumption: an interrupted time series analysis of alcohol sales in Yukon, Canada. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 81(2), 225-237.
- <sup>18</sup> Online survey of 1,126 adults aged 18+ in Scotland conducted 29 February to 18 March 2024 by YouGov on behalf of Action on Smoking and Health. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in Scotland (aged 18+).
- <sup>19</sup> Scottish Government (2018). [Alcohol Framework 2018: Preventing Harm. Next steps on changing our relationship with alcohol](#).
- <sup>20</sup> Institute of Alcohol Studies (2020). [Women and Alcohol](#).
- <sup>21</sup> Scottish Government. (2023). Consultation on restricting alcohol advertising and promotion: Analysis of responses. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/consultation-restricting-alcohol-advertising-promotionanalysis-responses/pages/1/>

