

Nearly 14 million American women are binge drinkers—and not just teens and sorority girls. Learn why a growing number of successful adults are hitting the bottle more than ever.

*By Joy Manning / Photographs by Claire Benoist*

# Smashed.





Last spring while on a business trip, Lisa\*, a married 32-year-old pharmaceutical executive from New Jersey, woke up naked in her hotel room. On the pillow beside her rested a scrap of paper with a phone number.

"I remembered meeting a guy while I was eating at a restaurant bar and, after a few glasses of wine, agreeing to go to a club with him," says Lisa. She assumes she had roughly seven drinks during the evening, though most of the details—including the man's name—were impossible to recall. These blackouts were becoming common for Lisa, who found herself drinking more as her stress level skyrocketed. After calling the number, Lisa learned that she did, as suspected, have sex with the man, who assured her he had used a condom.

Badly shaken, Lisa began sobbing uncontrollably. Although her marriage had been a bit rocky lately, cheating on her husband with a stranger was totally out of character. She finally realized that her drinking had become a major problem; she just wasn't sure what to call it.

Lisa's behavior, though extreme, doesn't meet the criteria for alcoholism, since she isn't physically dependent on booze and doesn't experience withdrawal symptoms if she goes too long without it. That's true for 90 percent of women who are living with an alcohol abuse disorder, the blanket term used to describe problem drinking. Technically, Lisa's actions make her a binge drinker, which the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) defines as "a pattern of alcohol consumption that brings the blood alcohol concentration level to 0.08 percent or more." (Meet or exceed that number and it's a crime to drive.) In other words, if you're drunk, you probably just binged. Although everyone metabolizes alcohol differently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that most women who consume at least four drinks in two hours will get to that point.

Of course, there's a big difference between drinking too much now and then—say, at a friend's wedding or on New Year's Eve—and downing a bottle of chardonnay every night. But many people aren't restricting themselves to special occasions: The CDC reports that nearly 14 million American women binge drink about once a week, though some experts believe the actual number is much higher. "Women notoriously underreport their drinking," says Dafna Kanny, Ph.D., a senior scientist with the CDC Alcohol Program. What's even more surprising is that 70 percent of binge drinking now involves adults over the age of 26. The question is why, and what is it doing to our bodies? Read on for a closer look at this trend and the toll it could be taking on your health.

## ***Intoxication nation***

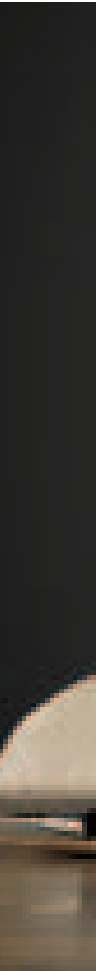
WINE, WHISKEY, AND THE LIKE HAVE long been the fuel for youthful indiscretions. But today the post-college crowd is partying harder than ever. "Simply put, we're not outgrowing binge drinking as quickly anymore," says Richard Grucza, Ph.D., an epidemiologist at Washington University School of Medicine. Many experts believe that the stress-fest of modern life is a major factor, especially for women. "It's the constant pressure of wanting to be everything to everyone—we have to be the best moms, be successful at work, and have a beautiful home and body," says Deni Carise, Ph.D., deputy chief clinical officer at CRC Health Group, a network of addiction treatment providers. Many of her patients say they turn to alcohol to quickly turn off the workday and become the laid-back and fun wife, mom, or girlfriend.

Charlotte\*, a 40-year-old tailor and artist, knows firsthand how drinking can seem like a magic way to shift gears. A New Orleans native who fled to New York City after Hurricane Katrina, she found herself in a corporate job she hated. "Soon I had a nightly routine that involved picking up wine after work and drinking the whole bottle," says Charlotte. "Wine and a sleeve of crackers became my typical dinner." While she knew it wasn't healthy, the habit was an easy way to mute her anxieties and frustrations.

She also believed, at least initially, that it was a perfectly acceptable thing to do, given the current culture. Spirits-soaked book clubs and BYOB playdates have become the norm, as has participating in wine tastings and ordering the chef's menu—complete with drink pairings. Although these activities don't always lead to binge drinking, they can lay the groundwork for it—and may even be perceived as signs that you're leading a stylish, successful life. In fact, research shows that binge drinking is most common among those who are highly educated and have a household income above \$75,000.

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\*Names have been changed.



Meanwhile, social media, such as Twitter and Instagram, can make it appear as if everyone is constantly raising a glass. When friends are posting photos of their latest cocktail creations—and you're getting pinged with reminders that it's National Martini Day, Bourbon Heritage Month, or Wine-Down Wednesday—it's easy to think you're missing out if you don't get in on the action. Even fitness fanatics are drinking more. Many U.S. cities have thriving "hasher" clubs, which combine workouts with pit stops at bars and proudly advertise themselves as "a drinking group with a running problem."

Although you can certainly join in the fun without overdoing it, the CDC says that more than half of the alcohol adults consume is excessive. "Everywhere we look there are representations of binge drinking as light-hearted entertainment," says David Sack, M.D., CEO of

**"Women who binge drink eventually become less able to pick up on the cues that signal danger."**

the California-based Promises Treatment Centers. "It sends the false message that it's normal and harmless." What you won't see on Facebook fan pages or booze-hounds' Twitter feeds are the hangovers, ruined relationships, and other negative effects.

## ***Your health, on the rocks***

STRESS MAY BE THE MOST COMMON REASON women drink, but in reality the practice may make you feel more frazzled. "Alcohol tricks your brain into thinking you have an excess of GABA, an amino acid that's sedating," says Sack. "To compensate, your body pumps out another substance, glutamate, which is stimulating." As the booze clears your system, you're left with extra glutamate, which makes you anxious. If you've ever woken up during the night after tying one on with a racing heartbeat, this is why. "Over time, the excess of glutamate damages the amygdala, a part of the brain that deals with emotions," says Sack. For instance, it can lead to fights with loved ones. (Both Charlotte and Lisa recount sparring with their significant others when they drank.) This may be one reason why the more you drink,

**Too much fun?**  
"People are finding any reason—or no reason at all—to drink heavily," says alcohol abuse expert David Sack, M.D.



the more likely you are to get divorced, according to a study from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

Damage to the amygdala impairs your judgment as well, and not only when you're tipsy. It can leave you with a kind of "beer goggles" you never take off. "Women who binge drink eventually become less able to pick up on the cues that signal danger, making them more likely to take risks," says Sack. The effects are cumulative, yet even one binge can have serious consequences: More than 11,500 women die each year as a result of a binge-drinking event, most from either an accident or an overdose. Do it regularly and you increase your risk of breast and lung cancer. Frequent heavy drinking also ups your odds of developing type 2 diabetes by contributing to insulin resistance, a precursor to the disease. And binge drinkers are 50 percent more likely than non-bingers to have multiple sex partners—which raises the risk of STDs and unplanned pregnancy.

Letting the liquor flow freely can also undo your efforts to stay active. For Maria, 32, working out was a priority, but she worked as a bar manager and her social life revolved around drinking. "It was not unusual for me to get drunk on tequila nearly every night," recounts Maria. While she knew her habit was detrimental, she didn't realize that alcohol actually eats away at muscle mass. Simultaneously, booze short-circuits your metabolism because the liver is too busy processing alcohol to prevent calories from being stored as fat. And hangovers, of course, are exhausting. "I often canceled plans to run with friends and skipped my own scheduled workouts," says Maria.

While men who drink to excess face similar problems, women are impacted more significantly in the short and long term. Females tend to have a higher percent of body fat, so alcohol doesn't get as diluted and they feel drunker, faster. Men also have more of the enzyme that breaks down alcohol, so booze doesn't stay in their bloodstream as long. In other words, forget keeping up with the boys: Even if you're the same height and weight as a man, imbibing an equal amount is going to hit you harder.

## A better balance

**I**F BECOMING A TEETOTALER seems like the healthiest solution, you should know that the news about alcohol isn't all bad. For example, studies have linked moderate consumption, which the U.S. Dietary Guidelines define as no more than one drink per day for women, to a lower risk of heart disease and stroke. But can someone who routinely goes on drinking sprees really learn to scale back?

Surprisingly, the answer seems to be yes. While the prevailing wisdom is that alcoholics, who are physiologically addicted to alcohol, must abstain entirely, binge drinkers don't necessarily need to break up with booze, says Kanny. Some people can simply promise themselves they won't have more than, say, three drinks a week—and actually stick to it, adds Carise. (For the record, 12 ounces of beer, 1.5 ounces of hard liquor, or 5 ounces of wine counts as a standard

drink; a bottle of wine contains about six servings.)

But not everyone can go it alone. That's where a growing movement, much of it online, comes in. The goal is to provide the resources and support people who need to control their drinking without going through a 12-step program. Drinker's Check-up (drinkerscheckup.com), for example, is a website and free app developed by a psychologist. After filling out an in-depth, interactive questionnaire, users get personalized feedback, including an assessment of their risk for health problems. This tool also helps them shape a strategy to cut back; for example, it might suggest tracking your drinks or choosing ones with a lower alcohol content. Clinical trials show that working with the site or app is as effective as meeting with a counselor face-to-face.

After using Drinker's Check-up, many women move on to online support groups such as Moderation Management (moderation.org) or HAMS (hamsnetwork.org), which stands for harm reduction, abstinence, and moderation support. Many former binge drinkers use these sites in an effort to conform to the NIAAA guidelines for low-risk drinking (for women, no more than seven drinks per week and no more than three on any given day).

Of course, moderation doesn't work for everyone. Maria, for example, has cut alcohol out of her life entirely. "I always drank to get drunk," says Maria, who's now a full-time personal trainer. "Giving up drinking was the choice I needed to make to have the body and life that I want." But others are happy with their decision to find the middle ground. Charlotte, who used to drain a bottle of wine a night, realized she could enjoy her vino without the downsides by spreading the same amount over the course of a week. And, after a three-month dry period, Lisa, with the support of her therapist, now limits her consumption to weekends and stops after two drinks. As a result, she's lost 20 pounds and feels a restored sense of self-esteem. Best of all, her marriage is back on solid ground. Says Lisa, "I'm much happier and healthier now." Cheers to that!

### Tech control

#### **IDRINKULATOR LITE** (free; [itunes.com](#))

This tracker lets you keep tabs on how much you're downing and displays the number of minutes you'd need to swim or jog to burn off those calories. Switch to the "Yuckulator" view to see all the junk food you could have eaten instead.

#### **ALCOHOOT** (\$99; [getalcohol.com](#))

Not sure if you've had too much? Breathe into this sleek Breathalyzer (it attaches to your smartphone) for a reliable reading of your blood alcohol level. The device will prompt you to call a taxi if you're over the legal limit.

#### **DRINKING MIRROR** (\$1; [itunes.com](#) or [play.google.com](#))

Upload your photo to this app, enter the number of glasses you toss back each week, and get a glimpse of the wrinkles and jowls that could be yours in 10 years if you don't make a change.

#### **DRINK CONTROL** (\$3; [drinkcontrolapp.com](#))

When you learn exactly how much money your habit is costing you, the sticker shock alone may motivate you to slow down. You can also use the app to monitor your monthly intake.