

CDC On the Air

Women, Girls, and Binge Drinking

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Host] Binge drinking is a dangerous and costly public health problem, and it's bigger than we thought. In July 2013, CDC's Alcohol Program Director, Bob Brewer, went on the air to discuss the serious, under-recognized problem of binge drinking among women and girls.

[Bob Brewer] Excessive drinking, overall, is about the third leading preventable cause of death in the United States. We estimate there are about 80,000 deaths, about 2.3 million years of potential life lost in the United States each year that is related to excessive drinking. We know that binge drinking is, by far, the most common pattern of excessive drinking in the United States, and women are certainly not spared.

For women, binge drinking is defined as four or more drinks within an occasion, or within a short period of time, and basically, we're talking about a level of alcohol consumption that is associated with acute intoxication. Most women who binge drink do so frequently, and so we estimate about three episodes of binge drinking, on average, among women per month, and when women binge drink, they tend to drink a lot. Four drinks is the cut point we use for defining it, but in fact, on average, what women tell us they consume is about six drinks per binge drinking episode.

One of the key points that we wanted to make is that binge drinking really is an important problem across the lifespan, and we estimate about one in five high school girls binge drink and—this what they tell us—within the past month, and that goes up a little bit among 18–24 year olds—it's about one in four, and then back to around one in five 25–34 year olds. So, an important take-home message there that I think is a bit different than a lot of people think, with respect to binge drinking, is that it actually is a big problem across the lifespan. It isn't just a problem with high school girls or college-age women. In fact, it continues well into middle age and beyond.

There are a number of different things that we can do to prevent binge drinking, both among women and girls, and frankly in the population as a whole. Some of the same factors that are influencing the drinking behavior of high school students, underage youth, and adults are really the same, and a lot of those have to do with the environment within which people are making their drinking decisions. So, how available alcohol is, how much it costs, the extent to which it's advertised. And we know, by and large, the general trends, in terms of alcohol policy, is that alcohol has been becoming less expensive, tends to be more available, and we know that it's very heavily advertised, and we're particularly concerned about overexposure of youth to that alcohol advertising.

[Host] To learn more about excessive alcohol consumption among women and girls in the U.S., visit cdc.gov/features/vitalsigns/bingedrinkingfemale.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.