

A girl's big night in

The Age | Thursday, 10 April 2008

Reuters

SUP UP: According to new research talking about drinking is a way of helping middle-class women make the transition into motherhood.

Among the tales of nappies and sleep deprivation, there is one topic of conversation that often crops up when new mothers get together: alcohol.

University of Melbourne researcher Ben Killingsworth noted it when he was sitting in on playgroups as part of an anthropology PhD: the way they'd joke about sipping on the cooking wine or reminisce about their pre-baby exploits at the pub.

There was no evidence that the women were actually drinking at high levels - just that talking about drinking was a way of helping them make what for many middle-class women is a very difficult transition into motherhood.

"By talking about drinking they were able to reassure themselves and each other that they were, deep down, still the same independent women they had been [before motherhood]," Killingsworth says.

Alcohol is an important social lubricant for men and women, with young females particularly at risk of harm from heavy drinking as they try to keep up with the boys in male-dominated professions. Yet perhaps more insidious than the youth bingeing epidemic is the amount of drinking that's going on behind the closed doors of the 'burbs.

It's the bottle of wine at the school picnic, the stubbies by the barbecue, the shared bottle over dinner. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that about 40 per cent of us drink at least weekly, with the peak age for this type of consumption at 40 to 49 before it drops off in older age.

Louise*, a 41-year-old part-time working mother of three from Petersham, drinks while cooking and helping the kids with their homework. "On the days I'm not working I wait until five o'clock before opening a bottle of wine. On days I am working I open a bottle as soon as I walk in the door, which is about six o'clock. On weekends, if we have people over for lunch then we start drinking at lunchtime.

"[My husband] and I easily drink a bottle between the two of us and then he has a few scotches as well. It's not unusual for me to go through 2/3 of a bottle on my own.

"Why do I drink? It relaxes me. It's to get over the hump of getting the kids fed and bathed and into bed, doing homework and into bed again - it's like I have no personal space any more, so this [the glass of wine] becomes my personal space.

"I do aspire to have three alcohol-free days a week but I rarely make that target and I am a bit concerned about it at some level."

Alcohol has always been a ritual - the boozy lunches of the 1980s, the G&Ts of the 1950s. The bad news is that not only is our consumption increasing but there's a growing body of evidence that the glass or three so many of us use to unwind while the kids are going troppo may be more harmful than we think.

Anything above two standard drinks a day can cause long-lasting damage to the liver and brain. Binge drinkers might be at risk of acute harm, such as having an accident, but regular low-level drinking has been linked to cancer, particularly breast cancer, raised blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, liver damage, depression and dementia, says Professor Steve Allsop, the director of the National Drug Research Institute.

"It might have a subtle impact - the difference between getting an A- and a B+ - but it can erode your problem-solving ability and just reduce your potential a bit," he says.

The problem with drinking daily, he says, is that it's so easy to slip above the one or two glasses.

"The risk of damage increases the more you drink and the more often you drink," he says.

Women are particularly vulnerable to the effects of alcohol: their smaller bodies, smaller livers and higher proportion of body fat mean they are more quickly affected and more prone to long-term damage.

More men still drink at risky levels than women but the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that the biggest increase over the past 10 years is in women, with the greatest number of problem female drinkers being middle-aged. Binge drinking in this group is less common but this sector of the community is more likely to drink on a regular basis - in 2005, 13 per cent of females aged 45-54 were risky drinkers, compared with 10 per cent in 2001 and 6.7 per cent in 1995.

The Federal Government is focusing its attention on the problem of binge drinking, especially among teenagers, but the British Government is targeting middle-class wine drinkers as well.

Following a hard-hitting British Medical Association report last year into the social and other ills alcohol is causing in that country, Professor Ian Gilmore, the president of the Royal College of Physicians, called for even lower limits on recommended daily intakes due to an epidemic of excessive middle-class drinking: "These are not people who turn up drunk in emergency departments but who drink at home, to unwind, after a stressful day."

His call has triggered much debate in Britain, with some commentators arguing that most people know when to stop and interference from health professionals has gone too far.

It's a dilemma for health educators: research is confirming there are long-term adverse effects of drinking anything more than a very small amount of alcohol daily - but how do you sell that message to a community that regards alcohol as one of life's essential pleasures?

The challenge is set to become even harder, with the National Health and Medical Research Council looking at tightening its guidelines.

Draft guidelines, now under consultation, will reduce the recommended daily alcohol intake from four standard drinks a day for men and two for women to two drinks a day for both sexes.

Translated, that means no more than 200 ml of wine or two stubbies of light beer a day, for anybody.

Creina Stockley, a clinical pharmacologist with the Australian Wine Research Institute, and others are worried that tightening the recommendations too far runs the risk that they will be ignored.

"I think the guidelines need to be realistic," she says. "If they're not culturally relevant they're unlikely to result in a change in behaviour."

True, there's mounting evidence that regularly drinking above the recommended level can affect your health, she says. But occasionally having three or four drinks in one day isn't likely to do much harm.

In fact, research suggests that the regular low-level consumption of alcohol confers health benefits. Immediately after you drink there are beneficial effects on the blood clotting and lipid mechanisms, while long-term drinking of some alcohol can reduce the chance of heart attack or stroke.

Stockley says the harms from alcohol form a "J" curve: people who drink some alcohol are less likely to die of any cause than non-drinkers but the risk of death rises sharply as the amount of alcohol consumed increases.

For the mothers sipping their semillon in the suburbs, it's a constant niggling fear: are they drinking too much?

Jo, 41, who is studying full-time and has two teenage children, drank two or three glasses most evenings before she gave up for six weeks recently because she wanted to lose weight. The break, she says, gave her a whole new outlook on her alcohol consumption.

"Since I have given up I feel more measured and in control and not so obsessive about it," she says.

Two-glass tipplers shouldn't lose their bottle

The Gilmore report in Britain triggered a storm of protest from those working couples who enjoy their wine. London's Daily Telegraph columnist Jan Etherington has had enough.

"I've been called a lot of things in my time but never a 'middle-class alcohol abuser'. Until now. Professor Gilmore insists that drinking between 1½ and 3½ bottles of wine a week makes me a 'hazardous' drinker," she wrote.

"Hazardous? Swimming with sharks is hazardous. But now, apparently, splitting a bottle of wine with my husband over dinner is as potentially injurious to my health.

"And now we're supposed to spend our evenings with a measuring jug instead of a wine glass, muttering: 'I'll just have a 125ml unit.' Do I drink too much? Should I cut down? The guilt of my Sunday school years remains. When I'm dragging the crate of empties to the recycling plant, I try to still the rattling, or I trill 'We had a party!' to anyone nearby.

"The guilt sets in before I've even bought a bottle. I read up on wine with low tannins and low alcohol content, and search the shelves for those with an 11 or 12 per cent alcohol by volume, rather than just picking up the ones that taste the best - which almost always tend to be more alcoholic.

"When it comes to the actual drinking, I try to down a glass of water for each glass of wine. The result is that most of the pleasure - which is surely the point - has gone from an evening's relaxation because I spend most of the time counting. And not just my intake - my husband's, too. ('Did you have another unit when I went to the loo?')

"Now, a house without an opened bottle of wine in the evening is one I've yet to encounter but the vast majority of us are wise in our consumption. We know when enough is enough.

<http://stuff.co.nz/4472403a19716.html>