

Girls and alcohol: A risky combination

As a woman and mother of a teen and pre-teen daughter, I am keenly aware of the threat alcohol poses to all of us. If research from our nation's leading scientific and medical facilities is to be believed (and I think it is), alcohol, while potentially dangerous for all people, is uniquely threatening to females.

Over the last several decades, we have witnessed a destructive cultural shift in the manner females consume alcohol. Once identifying excessive consumption as a uniquely male boorish practice, such activity, though still boorish, is no longer just a "guy thing." Dr. Tim Stockwell, director of the Center for Addictions Research, said, "Women are drinking more. They're drinking more like men, sadly, and they're drinking more often and heavier when they drink."

Among young women, binge drinking has more than tripled over the last 25 years, and they are consuming alcohol at rates that parallel patterns of the most abusive male drinkers. This is hardly good news or evidence of our gender equality. The only beneficiary, of course, is the alcohol industry, which benefits enormously from all use. It is well-documented that this industry aggressively markets young teens, especially girls.

On average, a child takes his or her first drink at age 12, though 10 percent of 9-10 year-olds have begun drinking (and an estimated 40 percent have tried alcohol). By age 14, girls are exceeding boys in consumption.

Teens that begin drinking by age 15 are five times more likely to struggle with issues of alcohol abuse or dependency during their lifetime than peers who delay drinking onset until age 21. Research consistently finds that the biggest influence on whether teens choose to drink is directly related to the amount of parental pressure they experience that encourages them not to drink.

Too many girls begin drinking before or during adolescence, with the family home their primary place of access. By the time they depart this "safety net," many are already hard-core seasoned drinkers. Giving parents the benefit of the doubt about teen drinking, it's puzzling how such alcohol abuse could escape the watchful eye of even moderately attentive parents.

It's well-established that alcohol abuse by teens is associated with a wide range of extremely high risk, undesirable and often illegal behaviors. A recent study by the University of Buffalo's Research Institution on Addictions found that increases in young women's drinking during the transition from high school through the first year of college life could have dangerous physical, sexual and psychological implications.

Of those victimized following alcohol consumption, 13 percent experienced severe physical victimization and 38 percent experienced severe sexual victimization. With 75

percent of "date rapes" involving alcohol, some aptly characterize it as the ultimate "date rape" drug.

Kathleen Parks, a principal study investigator, said, "Young college women should be aware that becoming a new drinker or increasing one's drinking during this transition increases the likelihood of victimization."

Research establishes that females tend to become both impaired and addicted to alcohol faster than males. It's certain that women are more vulnerable to the damaging effects of alcohol than men.

But aside from the threat of potential alcohol dependency or victimization, research is rapidly discovering the personal health threat alcohol poses for women. For instance, a Harvard University study finds that even small amounts of alcohol increases a woman's risk of breast cancer. Heart and liver damage, as well as long-term brain shrinkage is more threatening in women than men.

Says researcher Barbara Flannery, "We have known that liver damage, heart damage and circulatory system problems related to alcohol abuse occur more quickly in women and with lower levels of consumption. We now know that the same is true for mental function." Studies find that women suffer irreversible brain damage more quickly than men.

As women, we must recognize the threat alcohol poses. For adult women (21 and older), responsible use of alcohol is critical. The damage from alcohol is progressive, and later life reduction in consumption, even elimination, may be too late to reverse its damaging effects.

As a mother, whether for sons or daughters, our children deserve every opportunity in life, but their early use of alcohol jeopardizes their potential and short-term and long-term quality of life. They expect us to protect them from the dangers they cannot know, and for that to occur, parents must act like responsible adults about teen drinking.

Underage drinking is an adult problem. For teens, there is no such thing as a safe drink -- there is only risk.