



# Data Points

RESULTS FROM THE CALIFORNIA WOMEN'S HEALTH SURVEY

National population-based studies indicate that women are less likely than men to drink or to drink heavily, but that the gender gap in alcohol abuse and dependence appears to be narrowing.<sup>1</sup> As a result of gender-related physiological differences, women may experience negative health consequences at lower levels of consumption and with a shorter duration of heavier drinking than men.<sup>2</sup> Heavier alcohol use is associated with a wide array of health-related problems including risk for injury, illness, and alcohol dependence. Women who are heavier drinkers appear to be at risk for a number of health problems including alcohol-related liver disease, injury, neurological problems, hypertension, breast cancer, and violent victimization.<sup>2,3</sup> Alcohol and other drug problems are also highly correlated with mental health problems.<sup>4</sup> Measures of heavier drinking occasions (i.e., five or more drinks on one occasion) are often associated with high levels of alcohol-related risks or problems, even when overall volume of drinking is low.<sup>5</sup>

The 2004 California Women's Health Survey (CWHS) asked all women respondents two questions about indicators of alcohol-related problems in their entire lifetime: 1) "Was there ever a time when you felt your drinking had a harmful effect on your health?" and 2) "Have you ever gone to anyone – a physician, AA, a treatment agency, anyone at all – for a problem related in any way to your drinking?" Other questions were asked about alcohol use in the past 30 days and about whether respondents wanted and received help from a mental health professional.

This report compares responses from women who had abstained from alcohol in the preceding 30 days, moderate drinkers (respondents who consumed alcohol in the past 30 days but did not consume five or more drinks on at least one occasion), and heavier drinkers. Overall, approximately half the respondents in 2004 reported abstaining from alcohol (50.5 percent) and nearly half reported at least some drinking (49.5 percent). Among drinkers, approximately 8.0 percent were heavier drinkers (defined as women who reported drinking five or more drinks on a single occasion once or more in the past month). Findings are summarized below.

- Women who were heavier drinkers were significantly more likely to report past harm to their health from drinking (34 percent), compared with moderate drinkers (17 percent) or abstainers (13 percent).
- Heavier drinking women were also more likely to report having sought help in the past for a drinking problem (7 percent), compared with abstainers (3 percent) or moderate drinkers (2 percent).
- A separate analysis, found that heavier drinking women were more likely to report needing help from a mental health professional in the past year (30 percent), compared with 22 percent among drinkers and 18 percent among abstainers. At the same time, moderate drinkers who wanted help were most likely to get help (64 percent) than heavier drinkers (55 percent).

## *Health and Mental Health Problems Among California Women by Drinking Status: Abstainers, Moderate Drinkers, and Heavier Drinkers*

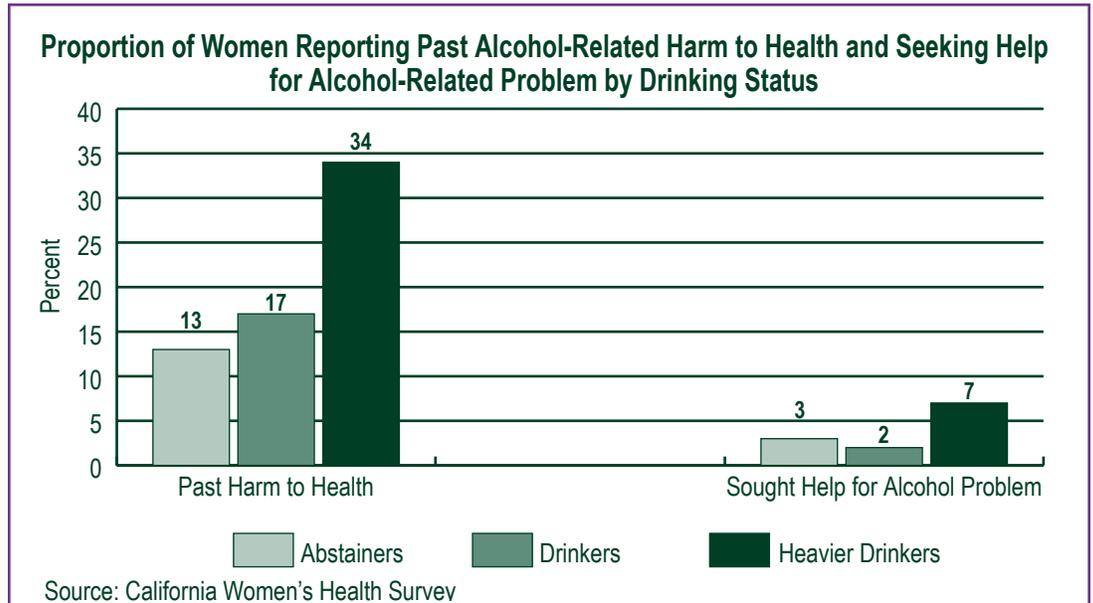
California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs

### **Public Health Message:**

*Women who are heavier drinkers were significantly more likely to report harm to their health than moderate drinkers or abstainers. They were also more likely to have sought help in the past for a drinking problem. These findings underscore the importance of screening for heavier drinking and alcohol-related problems in both health and mental health settings. In addition, the findings support the importance of efforts to facilitate collaboration between mental health and substance abuse treatment fields.*

**Health and Mental Health Problems Among California Women by Drinking Status: Abstainers, Moderate Drinkers, and Heavier Drinkers**

California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs



- 1 Grant BF, Dawson D, Stinson FS, Chou S, Dufour MC, Pickering RP. The 12-month prevalence and trends in DSM-IV alcohol abuse and dependence. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*. 2004;17:223-234.
- 2 National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA). Are women more vulnerable to alcohol's effects? *Alcohol Alert* No. 46. 1999.
- 3 Bradley KA, Badrinath S, Bush K, Boyd-Wickizer J, Anawalt B. Medical risks for women who drink alcohol. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. 1998;13:627-639.
- 4 United States Department of Health and Human Services. Overview of findings from the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. United States Department of Health and Human Services. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). DHHS Publication No. (SMA) 04-3963. 2003.
- 5 Midanik LT, Tam TW, Greenfield TK, Caetano R. Risk functions for alcohol-related problems in a 1998 US national sample. *Addictions*. 1996;91:1427-1437.

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