

Dangers of women binge drinking

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More young women are drinking to excess, which makes them vulnerable to molesters. CHIA HUI JUN reports

Daphne (not her real name) would have one or two alcoholic drinks when she first started drinking three years ago at the age of 19. Now, she downs six or more drinks in three hours of clubbing to 'reach that state of high'.

Hui Min, 22, a broker, empties a bottle of whiskey or brandy with her clients in a couple of hours.

They are part of a growing group of young women who binge drink, said Dr Mathew Mathews, a sociologist at the National University of Singapore.

The National Health Survey last year found that 12.2 per cent of women between the ages of 18 and 29 binge drink.

Binge drinking is defined as consuming five or more alcoholic drinks for males or four or more alcoholic drinks for females in one drinking session.

Last month, a report in *The Straits Times* said more and more women were getting intoxicated, making them easy targets for molestation.

Women agreed it was one of the dangers of drinking to excess, especially if one was not in the company of friends.

'I drink more only when I'm clubbing with close friends. We look out for one another, so if I'm really drunk, they will make sure I get home safely. But anything can happen to women who drink alone,' Daphne said.

Women tend to get drunk more quickly than men, because they have a smaller body size and lower levels of an enzyme that helps break down alcohol, said Dr Tan Hwee Sim, deputy chief of the Addiction Medicine Department in the Institute of Mental Health.

Women's bodies also have a higher fat-to-water ratio than men's.

Muscular tissue, which men have more of, contains more water. As women have more fatty tissue, alcohol is less diluted when it enters the bloodstream.

Checks with popular clubs Zouk and The Butter Factory showed women average four to six drinks per night.

And young adults drink the hardest. A paper in the journal *Alcohol And Alcoholism* found the number of people binge drinking doubled between 1992

and 2004, especially among adults aged between 18 and 29.

Daphne, now a 22-year-old student, said she often ended up not remembering what happened the previous night after she got drunk. She drinks twice a week.

She once woke up in hospital with a cut under her right eye and no recollection of how she was hurt. Friends said she fell.

But even after that, she did not change her drinking habits.

'I don't exactly enjoy the taste of alcohol but drinking helps me relieve stress after a long or bad day,' she said.

'We are only young once so if I don't binge drink now, then when? I don't want to wait till I'm older, when my liver can no longer take such stress.'

Psychiatrists said people who self-medicate with alcohol may have underlying mood disorders.

Dr Nelson Lee, a psychiatrist at The Psychological Wellness Centre, said binge drinking may be a temporary escape from problems.

It has a calming effect on patients who struggle with anxiety and makes people with depressive disorders feel better for a while.

Those who have a family history of alcohol addiction may find it harder to control their drinking, he added.

Women, being more sensitive to alcohol, do not have to drink as much as men to be at risk of alcohol addiction.

Any heavy drinker knows the downside of getting drunk.

Alcohol intoxication can impair mental capability and judgment and cause the loss of balance and motor skills; these are just some of the ways that binge drinkers can embarrass or hurt themselves or, perhaps worse, hurt someone else, said Dr Tan Chi Chiu, a gastroenterologist at Gastroenterology & Medicine International.

Acute alcohol poisoning can occur, which apart from all the effects of intoxication, can also inhibit one's involuntary reflexes and depress one's mental state, affecting breathing, heart rate and the gag reflex.

It can potentially lead to coma and death, sometimes caused by choking on vomit.

There are other effects of binge drinking, such as alcohol gastritis, which causes abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, said Dr Tay Seow Yian, head

of Emergency Department, Tan Tock Seng Hospital.

In severe cases, the patient can "tear" his gullet lining from excessive vomiting and bleed into the gut.

Doctors say young binge drinkers may suffer long-term consequences such as alcohol dependence, pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), memory disturbances, cognitive impairment, liver cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), clinical depression and anxiety.

But binge drinkers probably know about the dangers.

Jane, 26, said: "People drink to get high so even if they know drinking too much is bad for health, they will still do it.

"When they are high, they won't know what is happening and they have no capacity to stop anyone or say 'No'."

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Drunk women make easy targets for molesters

A report, 'Molesters' hunting ground: Nightspots', in The Straits Times on Jan 15 said that more women here are drinking until they get intoxicated, making them easy prey for molesters.

Clubs and bars are some of the places trawled by molesters looking for easy targets - women who are sloshed.

A bartender said in the report that more women are drinking more heavily than before.

Some popular nightclubs said they work closely with the police in cases where an outrage of modesty happens on their premises.

In the first six months of last year, 647 people were nabbed for outrage of modesty. This is slightly more than half of the total number of cases in 2009.

The Butter Factory and St James Power Station have stepped up security measures to identify potential suspects and take deterrent measures.

For example, at St James, more security officers patrol the dance floor on busy nights.