



Information for Service Women: Alcohol Use and Risks

There is no 'safe' level of drinking. All drinking behavior is considered to be risky due to the health consequences and risk of addiction and problematic relationships with alcohol use.

- While all alcohol use has consequences, not every person who consumes alcohol is experiencing an unhealthy level of alcohol use.
- Unhealthy levels of alcohol use are drinking patterns like binge drinking and heavy drinking.
- **Binge drinking** for females is defined by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) as the consumption of **4 or more standard drinks within 2 hours**. Binge drinking for females is also defined by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) as consumption of **4 or more standard drinks on one occasion** (with no time limit, differing from the NIAAA) on at least 1 day in the past month.
- **Heavy drinking, or heavy alcohol use**, for females is defined by NIAAA as **4 or more standard drinks on any day OR 8 or more drinks per week** and by SAMHSA as drinking **4 or more drinks on one occasion on 5 or more days** during the past months.

What is a 'Standard Drink'?

A standard drink is defined as:



12 ounces (oz)
of regular beer



8 -10 oz of
malt liquor or
hard seltzer



5 oz of table
wine



1.5 oz of
brandy or
cognac



2 – 3 oz of
liqueur



1.5 oz shot of
spirits (gin, rum,
tequila, vodka,
etc.)

Understanding the Risks

Unhealthy alcohol use is more frequent than may be expected, especially for Navy service women. The following statistics display the prevalence and impact that unhealthy drinking habits may have.

- The [2018 Health Related Behaviors Survey](#) found that 34% of all service members reported binge drinking in the past 30 days, in the same period the Navy reported 42.7%.
 - Both binge drinking and heavy drinking were highest in the Marine Corps and Navy.
 - Additionally, the report found that by gender, 28.2% of women reported participating in binge drinking behaviors over 30 days.
- According to the [2022 National Survey on Drug Use and Health](#) (NSDUH), 27.0 million women ages 18 and older reported binge drinking in the past month.
 - Additionally, 5.9 million women ages 18 and older reported Heavy Alcohol Use in the past month.
- Alcohol use [can lead to](#) liver disease, including cirrhosis, and increase risk of stroke, heart disease, and cancer. The NIAAA [found](#) that 5.6% of cancer cases and 4.0% of cancer deaths are attributable to alcohol consumption.
- The NIAA also estimates that estimates that each year there are more than 178,000 deaths due to excessive alcohol use.

Section 1: Understanding Stress and Alcohol Use

How Does Stress Influence Alcohol Use?

- Stress is any event or stimulus that is challenging, threatening, or overwhelming in our lives. It can be a physical, mental, cognitive, or emotional stimulus.
- **Stress is natural.** In fact, stress can be adaptive.
- The key to “adaptive” stress is when it **occurs in short-bursts**, i.e., just enough stress to get us to do something differently in response. In short-bursts, stress communicates something to us about our environment for the body to respond to.
- Stress no longer becomes “adaptive” when it is either so **intensely severe or occurs in longer and longer bursts.**
- Prolonged or intense stress results in **negative effects on our health** including fatigue, poor concentration, headaches, and digestive difficulties.
- Repeated stress or chronic prolonged stress can induce **lasting negative physiological and emotional changes** that increase risk of stress-related disorders even when the stress is removed or ended.
- **Chronically high stress levels can influence mental health**, increasing the risk for depression and anxiety. Studies have found that chronic stress and negative mental health can influence the risk of addiction and substance dependency.
- **High stress and chronic stress can influence one to drink**, increasing the risk of dangerous drinking behaviors. Moreover, lifetime exposure to stressors and adversity **creates vulnerability to addiction.**



How Can You Manage Stress?

- ✓ **Deep Breathing**
 - Systematic breathing can promote the release of “relaxing” hormones and can mitigate the effects associated with stress like elevated heart rate, shallower breathing and even elevated blood pressure.
- ✓ **Reframing**
 - Our thoughts influence our emotions. When you find yourself stressed, ask yourself – what is the underlying thought that is causing me to feel this way?
 - When we can identify our emotion, we can start to identify our thoughts. When we can start to identify our thoughts, we can then start to critically evaluate them and reduce our stress.
- ✓ **Connect**
 - Social interactions promote physical health, cognitive functioning, happiness, and increasing life span. Reach out to a friend or peer and schedule time to get together.
 - Identify the unhealthy relationships that raise our stress levels and draw boundaries with these individuals.
- ✓ **Improve Time Management**
 - A lot of stress, especially in the military, is often due to high op-tempos and the volume of taskers and can result in feeling overwhelmed. There are **three A's** when it comes to improving time management skills:
 - ✓ **Awareness:** Take objective inventory of your abilities to manage your time by reflecting on past performance. Objective evaluation lets you identify areas to work on.
 - ✓ **Arrangement:** This is a skill that focuses on structuring your work around your life. Organizing work to control our life leads to poor time management skills and degradation to our relationships and our own well-being. Prioritize activities and obligations.
 - ✓ **Adaptation:** This skill focuses on high pressure situations. “Habit stacking” is a way to automate time management behaviors by tying such behaviors to our established habits, i.e. running through calendar when brushing teeth.
- ✓ **S.T.O.P.**
 - Take a **Step** back and **Take** a breath from the stressful situation. A pause followed by a deep breath allows one to regain control of their mind to then **Observe**. When observing, it is important to acknowledge your thoughts and feelings as well as the environment without judgment. Once acknowledged, you can then **Proceed** mindfully by considering all facts and carefully choosing a response.

Section 2: Understanding the Cycle of Addiction

Understanding the Cycle of Addiction

There is no “**safe**” amount of alcohol use. Any alcohol use is considered risky because it can lead to the cycle of addiction.

The cycle of addiction is comprised of three phases that feed into each other, **use, stop in use, and absence of use.**

- **USE**
 - Use of alcohol leads to the positive effects of alcohol consumption, including the reduction of anxiety, increased happiness, and the ease of social interactions.
 - Positive effects and mood elevation triggers habit formation and drives the brain to place greater importance on things associated with drinking, like specific people/places/things.
 - The positive effects and association can then lead to urges to drink in the future!
- **STOP IN USE**
 - A stop in alcohol use leads to rapid decline of the positive effects of alcohol use, creating withdrawal and a further positive association with alcohol use.
 - In conjunction with the elevated release of the hormones that cause positive effects, the brain also activates the production of counter-active stress hormones.
 - Withdrawal is produced from two aspects; the drop in the positive reward, called the reward deficit, and then the production of stress hormones, called the stress surfeit.
 - Drinking now becomes a way to eliminate stress and enhance positive feelings.
 - However, over time the buildup of stress hormones leads to reduced positive effects from drinking, potentially furthering desire for alcohol use.
- **ABSENCE OF USE**
 - Absence of use comes after the initial withdrawal phase.
 - The over-production of stress hormones leads to increased activity in certain parts of the brain.
 - This over-activity, combined with the habit formation, leads to lowered activity in the prefrontal cortex.
 - The prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive functioning, including things like organizing thoughts, prioritize things, and critical decision
 - The drop in activity in the prefrontal cortex impacts other brain functions, leading to a subconscious drive to pursue alcohol.

The Cycle of Addiction



USE

Use of alcohol leads to positive effects



STOP IN USE

Stop in use creates withdrawal



ABSENCE OF USE

Absence of use changes brain function and drives desire of alcohol



Section 3: Resources for Alcohol Use

Service Specific Alcohol Use Resource: Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Program (SARP)

• Alcohol Misuse Voluntary Care

- Service members are eligible to receive voluntary alcohol misuse care, without requiring a referral or coordination with the member's command or drug and alcohol program advisor providing that the:
 - The diagnosis is mild
 - The recommended Level of care is Level 0.5: Early Intervention or Level 1: Outpatient (OP) treatment
 - The use disorder is not related to illicit drug use or use / abuse of prescription medications
 - Alcohol use was not identified through military or civilian law enforcement investigation or apprehension
 - A breathalyzer, or blood test indicated alcohol impairment while on duty
 - Service member has not been involved in an alcohol or substance related incident
 - Service member's alcohol use DOES NOT affect their judgment, reliability, or trustworthiness, or presents a clear risk to safety, security, occupational functioning, or mission
 - Service member DOES NOT have a specific command notification or other requirements to maintain compliance with their community's personnel reliability program
- NOTE: Service members who wish to seek service under the Alcohol Misuse Voluntary Care program are encouraged to contact their local SARP to schedule a screening / assessment

• Self-Referral

- This process provides a service member the opportunity to self-report substance misuse to receive screening/assessment and appropriate treatment for alcohol misuse without fear of disciplinary action.
- While the self-referral process is not an avenue to avoid the consequences of an alcohol related incident or drug use, members with valid self-referrals are not subject to disciplinary action.
- The request for referral must be made only to designated or authorized individuals. If the request for referral is made to an individual other than an authorized referral agent, it is not considered a valid self-referral but may be used as a factor in determining if a command referral is appropriate.

For More Information and Resources on Female Alcohol Use:

• [Women for Sobriety](#)

- Founded in 1975, the Women for Sobriety (WFS) is the first peer-support program tailored specifically for women overcoming substance use disorders (SUDs).

• [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)

- This resource contains information on alcohol and health, preventing alcohol related harms, excessive alcohol use, and gender considerations with alcohol use.

• [Veterans Affairs \(VA\)](#)

- This resource contains information on the services the VA provides for substance use problems, how to access services for substance use problems at the VA, where to find more information, help, and resources for SUD, and the Women Veterans Call Center.

• [Harvard University Stress & Development Lab](#)

- Relaxation strategies can reduce the physiological and emotional components of the stress response. Specific strategies include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, and use of auditory cues to relax (e.g., music). The site offers an overview of relaxation practice and access to specific exercise materials for relaxation.

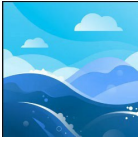


• [SHE RECOVERS Foundation](#)

- SHE RECOVERS is a non-profit movement dedicated to redefining recovery, inspiring hope, ending stigma and empowering women in seeking recovery to increase their capital, heal themselves, and help other women to do the same.
- They offer yoga classes, personal development and self-expression workshops, identity-based support groups (i.e., women of color, LGBTQAI+, veterans, mothers), and other tools.




Section 4: Phone Apps for Alcohol and Stress Management

Please find below phone apps service members dealing with alcohol use can use for recovery. All are available for iOS and Android.

Apps for Alcohol Management

App Name	App Description
<p>VetChange</p> 	<p>VetChange is an app for veterans and Service members who are concerned about their drinking, how it relates to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and how to develop healthier drinking behaviors.</p> <p>This app provides tools for cutting down or quitting drinking, tools for managing stress symptoms, education about alcohol use and PTSD symptoms, and guidance to find professional treatment.</p>
<p>I Am Sober</p> 	<p>I Am Sober is a sobriety counter app that tracks your sober time down to the second. The app is also unique in that it lets you know how much money you have saved while sober and includes daily notifications to help you throughout the recovery process.</p> <p>For those in the early stages of their recovery from drug or alcohol addiction, I Am Sober also offers a withdrawal timeline to know better what to expect and when regarding withdrawal symptoms.</p>
<p>Loosid</p> 	<p>Loosid is an app that provides direct connection to local recovery peers. Loosid includes educational and inspirational video and audio content and focuses on finding fun while in recovery. Loosid includes list of recovery friendly social events in your area and emphasizes on building community Loosid requires you to sign up with your real name and is not an anonymous community.</p>

Apps for Stress Management

App Name	App Description
<p>CBT-i Coach</p> 	<p>CBT-i Coach is a Veterans Affairs resource that features information and strategies on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for insomnia (CBT-i), free guided relaxation activities, and sleep logs to aid with sleep hygiene.</p>
<p>Woebot Health</p> 	<p>The Woebot Health app features a fully automated mental health ally that you can chat with, anytime day or night.</p> <p>Woebot invites you to monitor and manage your mood using tools such as mood tracking, progress reflection, gratitude journaling, and mindfulness practice.</p> <p>Woebot is intended to help you manage mood and anxiety symptoms and can be used as a mental health support tool to supplement treatments, therapies, or self-care practices.</p>
<p>Calm</p> 	<p>The Calm App features meditations, narrated Sleep Stories, and health and wellness videos. Meditation features include guided breathing exercises, a daily meditation, multi-day meditation and wellness programs, and unguided and guided meditation sessions.</p>

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