

# Drug Use and Gender

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## GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DRUG USE AND ABUSE

Looking at the world through a "gender lens" began in most areas of social science during the second wave of the women's movement, or the late 1960s through the 1970s. During this time feminist researchers began questioning science's conclusions by pointing to male-oriented biases in research questions, hypotheses, and designs.

Unfortunately, the "gender lens" did not appear in substance use research until the early 1980s. Prior to the 1970s, most studies of alcohol and other drug use were conducted among males. Early studies that included women suffered from the "add women and stir approach." Females were added to samples, but no gender-related concepts were used. The result was that women's and men's drug use were viewed through a male lens. Fortunately, the 1980s witnessed the first series of studies that placed women and gender at center stage. For instance, Rosenbaum's (1980) book on women heroin users was one of the first major U.S. publications to challenge conceptual frameworks on drug use, abuse, and treatment by gender socialization (e.g., gender roles).

The gender lens asks us to study substance use more carefully and to recognize the impact of social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity on individual and group drug use. Fortunately, gender oriented research has blossomed since the early 1980s. However, more is still known about male's drug use and abuse than female's. Following is a review of differences in rates of drug use, abuse, and drug-related problems and also gender-oriented explanations for them.

## PREVALENCE OF DRUG USE

Currently, the two leading data sources on substance use-National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA) and the Monitoring the Future (MTF)

study-report a greater occurrence of illicit substance use among males than among females. Both surveys have consistently documented this pattern over the years. According to the 1997 NHSDA survey, men reported a higher rate of illicit substance use (any illicit drug) than women, 8.5 percent to 4.5 percent, nearly double. Men report higher rates of cocaine use .9 percent versus .5 percent, alcohol use (58 percent versus 45 percent), binge drinking (23 percent versus 8 percent), and heavy drinking (8.7 percent versus 2.1 percent). The same pattern was observed in marijuana use (Office of Applied Studies [OAS] 1997).

Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman (1997) at the University of Michigan compile yearly data on the substance use of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders, college students, and young adults in the MTF study. These data also have consistently shown that drug use is not equally distributed by gender. Males are more likely to use most illicit drugs, and they report using such drugs earlier and longer than females. Males also use all illicit drugs at a higher frequency and in larger amounts than females. Several minor exceptions have been noted. For instance, substance use among the younger populations in the MTF study (i.e., 8th and 10th graders) reveals fewer gender differences than data for the older populations (i.e., 12th graders, college students, and young adults).

Regarding alcohol use, there is a substantial gender difference among high school seniors in heavy drinking. Thirty-eight percent of males report heavy drinking, while only 2-f percent of females do (Johnston et al. 1997). The same pattern is true for college students and young adults. Males drink more and more often. Males (51 percent) binge drink more often, i.e., have had five or more drinks on one occasion in the past two weeks, compared with females (22 percent). Males' cigarette use also outpaces females'. A review of trends in cigarette smoking suggests early dominance by males until the 19'os, when females reached parity with them. In the early 1990s, however, rates among males rose, while they dropped among females. Today