



## **Press Release** ***For immediate release***

**Issued by The Women's Health Council**

**29<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

**Page 1 of 2**

### **Women more vulnerable to drug/alcohol harm**

The Women's Health Council, the state agency promoting health and social gain for women, today published three reports on Women and Substance Misuse in Ireland. The reports explore women's alcohol and drug misuse, focusing on gender differences and highlighting the negative effects on women's health.

Although more men than women misuse drugs and alcohol in Ireland, the gender gap appears to be closing among younger women. Recent research shows that girls are now drinking almost as often as boys. In fact, binge drinking is now slightly more common among girls. In addition, girls and boys are now equally likely to misuse opiates and cannabis. Geraldine Luddy, Director of the Women's Health Council said 'These figures obviously give rise to concerns about the future health and well-being of women, and may suggest that drug and alcohol issues will be more of an issue for women in the future'. Ms Luddy also noted that women have different patterns of substance misuse than men – in particular, she drew attention to the fact that women are more likely to misuse prescription drugs, such as anti-depressants or sedatives, than men.

Research shows that women are particularly vulnerable to the negative health effects of alcohol and drug use, even though they have a lower levels of use than men. Women have been found to develop alcohol-related health problems earlier in their drinking careers than men, and to progress to problematic drug use and dependency more quickly than men. Women's biological make-up is partly responsible, particularly their hormones and their proportionally higher ratio of fat to water than men. These affect how much and how quickly alcohol and drugs are absorbed. It is essential that women are aware of the increased risks to their health posed by alcohol and drug misuse. Education initiatives should highlight women's vulnerability in this regard.

The Women's Health Council has identified caring for children as a central issue for women seeking treatment for drug/alcohol misuse. The provision of childcare facilities in conjunction with treatment services (including residential programmes) is extremely important, as they signal acceptance of women's situations, as well as responding to childcare needs in a practical way.

Polysubstance use, most commonly combining the use of alcohol, tobacco and any illegal drug, is an issue of growing concern in Ireland. It can make



treatment more complex and is often associated with poorer outcomes. For these reasons, it is important that treatment services manage all of the substance user's needs, addressing both alcohol and drug use at the same time. The Women's Health Council therefore supports the recent decision by Government to integrate alcohol and drug misuse in a single policy/strategy on substance misuse. However, the Council has stressed that a gender analysis must be built into any new drug and/or alcohol policy in order to address the differences in patterns, types and pathways into substance misuse.

## **ENDS**

### **For further information, please contact:**

Geraldine Luddy

Director

The Women's Health Council

Tel. 01 878 3777

Email: [aobrien@whc.ie](mailto:aobrien@whc.ie); Website: <http://www.whc.ie>

The Women's Health Council is a statutory body established in 1997 to advise the Minister for Health and Children on all aspects of women's health. The mission of the Women's Health Council is to inform and influence the development of health policy to ensure the maximum health and social gain for women in Ireland. Its membership is representative of a wide range of expertise and interest in women's health.

### **Notes to Editor:**

- ◆ *'Women and Substance Misuse in Ireland: Overview'* is available in hard copy and from the Women's Health Council website at: <http://whc.ie/publications/40>
- ◆ Separate reports on *'Alcohol and Women's Health in Ireland'* and *'Drug Misuse and Women's Health in Ireland'* are also available from the Women's Health Council's website.
- ◆ A forthcoming report by the Council will examine the related area of *'Smoking and Women's Health in Ireland'*.