People born after World War II are more likely to binge drink and develop alcohol disorders

EurekAlert

September 15, 2011 --. In a review of 31 peer-reviewed and published studies, researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health looked generational and gender differences in alcohol consumption, alcohol disorders, and mortality. Findings indicate that people born after World War II are more likely to binge drink and develop alcohol use disorders. Researchers also found that the gender gap in alcoholism and problem drinking is narrowing in many countries.

Findings will be published in the December 2011 issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* and are currently available at Early View.

"The literature on alcohol consumption indicates that younger birth cohorts, especially women, are increasingly at risk for the development of alcohol use disorders," said Katherine M. Keyes, PhD, a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Epidemiology at the Mailman School and first author of the study. "Given that alcoholism among women is increasing, there is a need for specific public health prevention and intervention efforts. Further, results suggest the environment increases the risk for alcoholism. While genetics play a substantial role, the generational differences between those born before and after World War II indicate that factors in the environment such as policies, laws, social norms, availability, and broader social context also contribute substantially to the underlying risk for alcohol use disorders in the population."

Although younger birth cohorts in North America, especially those born after World War II, are more likely than other cohorts to engage in heavy episodic drinking and develop alcoholism and/or binge drinking, this effect was not found in Australia and Western Europe. The investigators note that the U.S. differs from Europe and Australia in that we have a fairly large number of people who do not drink at all, although over time, the number of non-drinkers in the U.S. decreasing.

"The results on gender highlight the need for increasing research on the social etiology of alcohol use disorders," noted Dr. Keyes. "Traditionally, gender differences are explained by biological differences in the ability of the body to metabolize alcohol and other biological mechanisms. These results suggest that the magnitude of gender differences changes over time, highlighting an important role for societal factors."

The review is among the first to look at many individual studies on alcohol use disorders and provides evidence that problem drinking among young women is still increasing, an important finding for public health professionals to note. The authors point out the importance of making young people aware that heavy drinking poses unique health and social risks for women. Because of differences in average body

size, for example, a woman becomes more intoxicated than a man consuming the same quantity or alcohol. Women who drink heavily also face a greater vulnerability to sexual violence and greater risks of chronic diseases.

SOURCE [1]

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