



Sue Ann Says: Lets Change Wisconsin's Culture of Drinking

After the winter we endured, it's time to delight in all that summer offers: barbecues, baseball and boating; parties and picnics; long holiday weekends; and lazy days just enjoying family and friends.

Here in Wisconsin, what do all these summer activities have in common? Alcohol. Most of us have grown up watching friends and family include alcohol in their celebrations, even in their everyday get-togethers. For many Wisconsinites, a baseball game or a backyard cookout wouldn't be complete with just the brats. We've gotta have the beer. In Wisconsin, more than almost any other state in the country, there is a whole culture of drinking that says it's okay. It's fun. It's normal.

However, as I write this column Wisconsin is being heralded as the national leader in alcohol abuse.

I know, I know. You're thinking, "Here goes that bossy Sue Ann again. Doesn't that woman ever have fun? One little drink isn't going to hurt me, right?"

That one little drink? It has profound, far-reaching consequences for your health. For the health of your unborn children. For the health of your family, your friends and your community.

Consider this:

- Wisconsin has the highest number of binge drinkers in the country.
- The number of Wisconsin women who report binge drinking is almost twice the national average.
- Wisconsin women of childbearing age lead the nation in alcohol consumption. About 68 percent consume alcohol, compared to the national average of 50 percent.

Alcohol impacts women differently

Alcohol affects women differently than it does men. Women who drink are far more prone to liver disease, heart damage, and brain damage. Why? Alcohol becomes more highly concentrated in a woman's bloodstream than it does in a man's. Therefore, women become intoxicated more quickly with less alcohol. And because, pound for pound,

women have less water in their bodies than men, a woman's brain and other organs are exposed to more alcohol and to more of its toxic byproducts.

Alcohol and pregnancy

A recent Wisconsin screening study stated that 32 percent of women reported drinking during pregnancy, almost double the national average. Women who drink put themselves and their unborn babies at serious risk. Alcohol can harm a fetus at any point in the pregnancy – even before a woman knows she is pregnant.

You might be thinking, “I’ve heard doctors say that one drink every once in a while won’t harm the baby.” I’ve heard that too. With all of the contradictory information floating around, it’s hard to know what’s true these days.

I consulted Lisa Tiedemann, coordinator of the Wisconsin Women Health Foundation’s *My Baby & Me* program. She told me more about the devastating effects of drinking while pregnant. You’ve probably heard of fetal alcohol syndrome, just one of the fetal alcohol spectrum disorders that can occur when babies are exposed to alcohol in the womb. Lisa explained that these disorders can cause profound physical, mental, behavioral, and learning difficulties with life-long implications. FASD affects about 150-200 babies in Wisconsin each year. But this is 100 percent preventable – don’t drink when pregnant or nursing. Period.

Lisa explained that, in our culture of drinking here in Wisconsin, even trusted health care providers find it difficult to deny pregnant women the “right to drink”, as long as they “only drink one”, or drink after a certain point in the pregnancy. “Why are we afraid to tell women that during pregnancy no amount of alcohol is safe?” Lisa questioned. “The reality is – there is no known ‘safe’ amount to drink and no known ‘safe’ time to drink when pregnant. Pregnancy is a very complex time and what may be seemingly minimal drinking for one may be harmful for another. Therefore, from a public health perspective – we must say that there is no safe amount, no safe time and no safe type of alcohol for women to drink while pregnant.”

The Foundation’s *My Baby & Me* program works to improve the ability of prenatal care providers to address alcohol use by pregnant women. The non-judgmental, client-centered program focuses on understanding the realities of women’s lives. Healthcare providers trained through *My Baby & Me* know how to recognize and screen for potential alcohol abuse and addiction, venture into the often difficult discussions with their patients about alcohol use, and collaborate with their local addiction treatment providers to ensure women are receiving all the care and resources they and their babies need. The intervention program has had amazing results: 100 percent of the women enrolled report they did not consume alcohol once they entered the program.

“By reducing alcohol-exposed pregnancies, we can make a tremendous impact on the health of Wisconsin families,” Lisa says. “Abstaining from drinking throughout pregnancy and during breastfeeding is the best gift a mother can give her child. It’s a gift that lasts a lifetime.”

Changing the Culture

In Dane County, County Executive Kathleen Falk is working to combat our ‘culture of drinking.’ As County Executive, Kathleen realized how much of the state’s resources went into the problem of alcohol. She described how from 1994 to 2004, three times as many people were arrested in Wisconsin for alcohol violations than the national average. Worse yet, in 2006 there were 8,400 car crashes caused by alcohol in Wisconsin. Furthermore, alcohol was involved in 30% of assault cases in Wisconsin.

Kathleen also described the economic effects alcohol use has on our state. “In Dane County, we spend about \$50 million in tax dollars each year to run our jail. Nearly half of the sentenced inmates in the jail are there for drunk driving. Many others behind bars for domestic violence or assault or battery were under the influence of alcohol.” She also described programs intended to treat those with alcohol dependencies, which amount to about \$8 million per year. “This is a major commitment,” Kathleen said to me, “Treating the consequences of alcohol abuse and treating those who suffer from it is important work that we should do as efficiently and humanely as we can...but can’t we do more to prevent this to begin with?”

This is Kathleen’s mission – preventing the devastating effects of excessive alcohol use by preventing the excessive alcohol use in the first place. Kathleen urged me to challenge my own perceptions about our culture of drinking. “This isn’t about stopping drinking to celebrate...it’s about stopping the celebration of drinking. It is about exploring this mindset that we somehow should be proud of, or amused by, or find ‘normal’ those who drink just to get drunk. It’s about keeping kids safe, people alive, families together, and improving our public safety and health.”

Like Kathleen, the Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation is committed to preventing the devastating effects of alcohol abuse by curtailing the excessive alcohol use in the first place. Our goal is to keep people alive, keep children safe, keep families together, and improve our public health.

I call upon all of you to change your own perception of drinking – and then to go out and change others. Let’s take Wisconsin pride in a new direction. Let’s put our state at the top of the list for a more positive reason: as a national leader in alcohol awareness and prevention.

I know we can do it here in Wisconsin. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential.

WWHF presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, provides scholarships for women in academic medicine, and publishes resource materials. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.