

ASK OUR EXPERTS

A Special-Focus Series on Women, Addiction, and Recovery



 Hazelden Betty Ford
Foundation

It's Different for Women: Addiction Progresses Faster and Brings More Complications

Q&A with Pamela Shultz, MD, Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation

Q. How does addiction affect women differently than men?

A. We know that addiction progresses more swiftly for women and therefore complications from use tend to occur sooner and with less total use for women compared to men. There are a number of reasons for this. First, women absorb and metabolize drugs differently than men. With alcohol use in particular, women reach a higher blood concentration more rapidly and with fewer drinks than men.

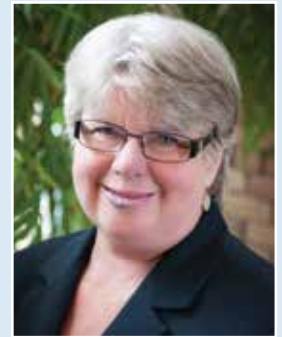
We also know that women develop complications from their alcohol use—liver disease or neurological problems, for example—more quickly, with fewer years of use, and with lesser amounts of alcohol than men. The same appears true when other drugs are misused. This means that by the time a woman enters addiction treatment, she typically has more severe medical, mental health, and social complications from her disease than a man entering treatment.

Another important difference we see relates to mental health. Women diagnosed with addiction suffer with anxiety, depression, trauma, or other co-occurring mental health conditions at a greater rate than men. For example, women with opioid use disorder are twice as likely as men to have either depression or anxiety.

A further issue in all of this is that women typically wait longer than men to seek help, resulting in a more severe progression of their disease.

Q. What is the potential impact for women who delay getting help?

A. In a word, tragic. I've seen fairly dramatic cases of women with severe neurologic problems related to alcohol use, developing cognitive impairment to the point of requiring nursing home care because they couldn't live



**PAMELA SHULTZ,
MD, FASM**

A physician and educator, Dr. Pamela Shultz oversees medical programs and leads multidisciplinary care teams at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation's campus in Center City, Minnesota. Dr. Shultz earned her medical degree at the University of Illinois and completed fellowships in nephrology at Case Western Reserve University and in addiction medicine at the University of Minnesota. She has served on the staffs of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Minneapolis, Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation's treatment center for teens and young adults in Plymouth, Minnesota, and Meridian Behavioral Health. Dr. Shultz also serves as an adjunct faculty member at the University of Minnesota's Department of Family Medicine and at the Hazelden Betty Ford Graduate School of Addiction Studies and is a Fellow of the American Society of Addiction Medicine.

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independently any more, even though they were only in their late 40s or early 50s. I've also seen women as young as 30-40 years old with significant liver failure due to drinking.

You can see how the faster progression of the disease, coupled with the delay in seeking treatment, creates a perilous situation for women with addiction. And remember, addiction is a chronic, relapsing, and potentially fatal disease if left untreated.

Q. What prevents women from getting help?

A. There are all kinds of factors that come into play, but more than anything I think stigma, shame, and fear keep many women from admitting they need help. What will people think? What will happen to my family if I go to treatment? These are the kinds of worries women have. What they don't necessarily realize is the negative impact of addiction on their family already, and the further harm that could result from not getting the help they need to regain their health.

It's been well established that addiction is a disease, complete with genetic determinants and biological changes in the brain. As the recent Surgeon General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs and Health advises, we need to face up to addiction as the health and safety threat it is.

Q. How do we bring about that change, particularly for women who bear the stigma?

A. Former First Lady Betty Ford showed us the way forward years ago when she spoke openly and courageously about her own struggles with alcoholism, her dependence on prescription painkillers, and her successful recovery. In fact, Betty Ford decided to not only talk about her experience but to help make addiction treatment more available to women by establishing the Betty Ford Center, now a part of the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation.

Providing gender-specific addiction treatment is another step in the right direction. Our treatment approach offers gender-specific programs and services, so women experience treatment with other women who share the same diagnosis.

To me, there's nothing more powerful than hearing from others who've been through what you're going through—who speak up to say treatment worked for them and recovery can be possible for you, too. Addiction is a chronic disease, but it can be managed successfully. You can get your life back.



Truly and Bravely You

Addiction takes you away from who you are, how you want to live, and what you care about most. *Hope is within reach.* We know from experience that treatment works. Families heal. And life gets better.

For nearly 70 years, we've helped women of all ages and from all walks of life find freedom from the disease of addiction. Our clinicians take a holistic and individualized approach to your care by offering the following:

- Customized treatment to fit your specific situation
- Comprehensive care for your mind, body, and spirit
- Integrated therapies to address trauma, depression, or anxiety
- Posttreatment care and recovery support

**Take the first courageous step to regaining your health, life, and career.
You're worth it!**

Reach out today. We're here for you.

Call **877-429-5088** to speak confidentially with a recovery expert or visit **HazeldenBettyFord.org/Women** to learn more.

