

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

They were saying, "I bought into this culture and I was following mom-wine culture essentially, and I started to turn to wine every night after I got my kids to bed and I developed a problem and it didn't work for me. It was unhealthy and these articles were about a rejection of this dialogue."

LuAnn Heinen:

That's Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams, a health services researcher with expertise in substance use, treatment disparities, and health outcomes in high-risk populations like veterans. She's a Research Associate Professor at Boston University School of Public Health with a joint appointment at the Veterans Health Administration. Most recently, she's led research to determine whether delayed parenting helps explain a significant increase in alcohol consumption by women in their mid-thirties compared to past decades.

I'm LuAnn Heinen and this is the Business Group on Health podcast, conversations with experts on the most relevant health and well-being issues facing employers.

In 2022, we spoke with Dr. John Kelly about trends in alcohol use and pathways to recovery. Today, Dr. Rachel Adams and I spotlight a specific segment of the population, women in their mid-thirties whose relationship with alcohol is raising concern. We talk about how societal shifts like delayed childbearing, social media, and "wine-mom culture" may powerfully influence drinking behavior midlife, along with ways employers can support this age cohort.

Hello Rachel and welcome to the Business Group on Health podcast.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

Hi LuAnn. Thanks for having me.

LuAnn Heinen:

We're going to focus on a topic that's really important and a bit fraught and that is women, particularly younger women, and drinking. Can I ask first what led you and your research in this direction?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

My professional life was impacted by my personal life here. I was training to be an alcohol researcher in my doctoral program and within a few years I became a new mom. I started to think about how alcohol was impacting women, and specifically new mothers, and this was around the time that Facebook and Instagram was emerging. I started just having more of a critical eye or just noticing things about how alcohol was talked about and viewed and shared from my peers and other moms out there and how alcohol was really something that they were turning to and it seemed like a helpful thing for moms is how it was portrayed. At the same time, professionally, I was learning about the risks of alcohol use and the potential harm. There was a contradiction and I think that contradiction just really helped me drill down and realize this is something I want to focus on in my own research.

LuAnn Heinen:

So you were trained in the field and you observed some of the signs what was going on. You also published a study recently on women's midlife binge drinking and alcohol use disorder symptoms in the U.S. and that study has a novel twist related to parenting. Would you summarize the top line findings?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

Yes, we're really excited about that work. It took several years for us to develop this study and be able to answer really the question we've been pondering, which is are there sort of changes over time in the United States and trends for risk for excessive drinking, binge drinking, or developing alcohol use disorder for women in middle age and is that impacted by transitioning to parenthood or becoming a mother. It's tricky to study something like that because lots of things have changed over the past 40, 50 years in our country, such as when women tend to have children, if they have children, how old they are, if they go to college and spend four years in college or what age they are when they have their first child. So we designed a study to be able to

study these changes over time. Our hypothesis was that there might be changes and specifically women who are mothers traditionally drink less than women who are not mothers of the same age. Usually, motherhood has been what's considered a protective factor for risky drinking, but we've been wondering if because women are either not having children or having children later in life, does that mean that less risky drinking for mothers is not happening as much or if women who are mothers aren't sort of drinking in the same ways now. So big picture, what we found was that women without children at age 35, because we were looking at age 35 drinking, are still at highest risk for binge drinking and alcohol use disorder symptoms. We did not find that there is a significant difference by motherhood status among women, but what we did find is that more recent cohorts, so women who are younger today than women who turned 35 20 years ago, they're drinking more now. What we're seeing is a trend toward more binge drinking and more women having alcohol use disorder symptoms at age 35 today.

LuAnn Heinen:

Yes, I've seen new information that the gap in binge drinking between men and women has narrowed. It used to be really a male thing, much less for females, and now women are catching up. What do you think is causing that?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

Yes, there's definitely been evidence that the rates for risky drinking are increasing faster for women, and this has to do we believe with numerous factors in addition to delaying parenting. There's also the fact that more women today are receiving a college degree and experiencing college life where they may be introduced to just routines and patterns of more excessive drinking and have that period of time.

LuAnn Heinen:

We're only talking about recent history, in the last 20 years. Have rates of college attendance and graduation for women gone up significantly? I think that's what's so stunning is that the 90s to me aren't that far. I mean I definitely lived through them, so that does not seem that long ago.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

Our study found that the most recent group of 35-year-old women were nearly twice as likely to complete four years of college compared to women who were 35 in the 1990s. So it was about 70% of women in recent years completing four years of college compared to only about 37% of women completing four years of college who graduated high school around late 70s. That really impacts their trajectory of career choices if they're working, if they're transitioning to parenthood or not. College can be a time where people really set their drinking patterns and routines and start to drink in perhaps more risky ways and also in places of employment for people in their 20s without children, alcohol is a big piece of that in the after work environment, so there's just potentially more opportunity and more years to continue with more excessive drinking behaviors before considering having children or not.

LuAnn Heinen:

I also got the sense that parenthood is less protective than in the past. Whether we're having kids at 20 or whether you're having them at 32, is it still less protective or is it just the fact that it's delayed that's making the difference?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

I think what we've found in our data so far is that it's just that the transition to parenthood is delayed. We said this in the discussion of our paper, we don't know for sure if that's true because we were looking at binge drinking and alcohol use disorder symptoms among women at age 35. So women had to be 35 already to be able to answer those questions and the data went up to pre-Covid years. I think that the younger generation, the younger millennials and Gen Z, we have to follow really closely because they are the ones who more so will be transitioning to parenthood. One study doesn't give us a definitive answer. I think that we need more research in this area and especially with the potential impacts of Covid on alcohol use for women and we'll need to keep watching this and looking at this over time.

LuAnn Heinen:

Do you see alcohol marketing as making a difference in all of this?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

For sure. There's been a shift in the types of products that are being marketed, which really do target women, whether they're mothers or not. You see a lot of low calorie seltzers on the market now that the cans look very similar to other seltzers. You see low calorie wines. There's expressions like Rosé All Day. There's alcohol popsicles out there. There's things that are targeting the demographic of women. And there's also been a partnering of alcohol advertising with social media. You see social media influencers are commonly advertising different alcohol products, and so I think there's a lot we don't know about that, but I do think that targeted marketing for women of low-calorie alcoholic beverages is something that should be carefully watched in terms of how this may be influencing drinking behaviors for women.

LuAnn Heinen:

What are some of the messages that as an addiction researcher you'd flag as potentially risky?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

It is risky to drink as a coping mechanism. If you're drinking because you're experiencing grief or you're experiencing trauma or you're experiencing stress, it increases your risk for development of addiction. It becomes this mechanism that you're using to try to cope with difficult feelings and it can be reinforcing and you might associate turning to alcohol when you start to experience those same feelings and symptoms again. I think that the risk of some of these messages on social media and in TV where there's really a reinforcement of trying to normalize the behavior of turning to alcohol at the end of the day because you've had a hard day parenting, and that's not a healthy coping mechanism.

LuAnn Heinen:

So normalizing drinking to cope, expressions like mommy juice or just the notion that wine is helpful for busy, tired, and stressed moms is potentially dangerous. What exactly do you mean by mommy-wine culture on social media?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

That's a great question. Mom-wine culture is something we're using as a phrase, and it comes directly out of some of the terms that have been used on Facebook and Instagram to sort of support pages and support groups and women coming together to talk about alcohol in relationship to motherhood. There are these sites, there's a Facebook group called Mommy Drinks Wine and Swears. There's an Instagram group called Mommy Wine Time. You started to see women joining these groups and posting pictures and there's these big wine glasses where it says mom juice or mommy sippy cup and expressions really about kind of equating children and the way they drink juice to being a mom and the way that moms drink wine. It's meant to be funny.

LuAnn Heinen:

I was just going to say, it just crossed my mind that last I heard juice wasn't highly recommended for little ones.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

That's right. We can learn a lesson or two, but it started off sort of harmless jokes. You can look on the internet and find t-shirts for moms that are kind of making the same sort of jokes, and there's been *Saturday Night Live* skits about moms in their wine and you watch TV shows expressing anything to do with parenthood and motherhood and routinely the mom is holding a huge glass of wine. So it's just sort of a culture that's been supported and fostered and social media is just a piece of it where it's kind of equating motherhood with drinking wine.

LuAnn Heinen:

It's maybe just an extension of the equating women with wine because even childless women, I mean think Olivia Pope on *Scandal* or *Yellowstone*, her name is Beth, and that's got to be whiskey.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

Yes, I mean you're right. It's this gendered notion about what alcohol products women should be having, Now it's not just women, but it's moms specifically. The concern about it from an alcohol public health perspective is really just, again, this sort of normalizing of the concept that when life is hard and stressful, alcohol will help, whereas we know it could create more problems.

LuAnn Heinen:

I was wondering about the even greater risk for women who may be struggling with postpartum depression. There's a personal account that's been shared on today.com, and it's a woman looking back on her undiagnosed postpartum depression. Her child was born several years ago and she really felt not herself after childbirth, and she was quoted as saying, "drinking was commonly suggested to me as a remedy for the difficulties of early motherhood. The most common gift I received after childbirth was alcohol. Friends stopped by to meet the baby and hand me a bottle of wine. You'll need this, they'd say with a wink, and we would both chuckle," and then "mom's self-medicate with booze" is something I even jotted down in my phone's notes app.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

That's so tough. The story is exactly right. It's probably the least helpful thing for a mom experiencing postpartum depression or postpartum anxiety, which is also very common because alcohol increases feelings of anxiety and can exacerbate depression. It interrupts sleep. For women experiencing that after transitioning to motherhood, it could really be harmful. You're right, this story about wine being given as a gift is very common, and this story is very similar to lots of the kind of how I started noticing this area as a potential area for research was around 2019 before Covid started, I started to notice that in the lay media in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Huffington Post*, other media outlets, there started to be stories from women very similar to the story you just read that they were saying, I bought into this culture and I was following mom-wine culture essentially, and I started to turn to wine every night after I got my kids to bed and I developed a problem and it didn't work for me. It was unhealthy. And these articles were about a rejection of this dialogue. I started to notice, well, this is coming out again and again, women are starting to notice this as problematic and state that this is risky, and I was really with some colleagues encouraging the alcohol research field to pay attention, because I think we really weren't doing a good job noticing this for a while.

LuAnn Heinen:

Well, let's talk about the sober curious movement, if we can call it that. This notion of perhaps a rejection of drinking culture, as you say, and maybe also partially in response to data that we've seen on how moderate drinking is still either actually bad or potentially bad for our health. Is this movement gaining momentum in your view?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

I think it is. I first learned about *Sober Curious*, it was around 2019, so again in that year before Covid started. The director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, Dr. George Koob mentioned the new book called *Sober Curious* by Ruby Warrington. I went out and read it. It was fascinating for me. I since then have been paying close attention to that term being used by other people. I noticed that some of these articles, like I was just mentioning with mommy wine, women rejecting this mommy-wine culture, some of them were mentioning the *Sober Curious* as something else to turn to, an alternative to that. Where I live in the suburbs of Boston, Massachusetts, there's suddenly a new group called Sober in the Suburbs that's being run by a local mom and she was just interviewed in *The Boston Globe*. There are other books that have come out. There's a book called *Quit Like a Woman* by Holly Whitaker, *The Radical Choice to Not Drink in a Culture Obsessed with Alcohol*. There've been some celebrities who've endorsed these books who've talked about the fact that they're choosing not to have alcohol anymore, and I think the sober curious movement captures a spectrum of people who are, some of them are in recovery, some of them were really just rethinking their relationship with alcohol and realizing that it wasn't benefiting them anymore, it wasn't feeling good for them. Not everyone who identifies as sober curious or who's interested in it is fully not drinking. Some people are

just really reducing their drinking, but I think it's bringing awareness to this idea that it's a healthy behavior that we all should be rethinking how we include alcohol in our life if we do so at all.

LuAnn Heinen:

It still feels like a bit of a minority position though, what seems more dominant, as you said, in TV and social media is not that, although it's growing. Why is it hard to counteract or push back? What are some of the challenges that individuals face, let's say they don't have a group in their neighborhood as was just formed in yours?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

That's a great point and I certainly don't want to overstate the emergence of the sober curious movement, because I think you're right. I think it is a growing minority, perhaps, but it's still very much a subculture and it is really tricky for people to navigate how to live a life where they're not drinking alcohol in the same way as their peers. We talk about teenagers and college students experiencing peer pressure, but I think that we all experience it. I think that new young moms who are with other young moms and alcohol is a big part of that social experience, feel the pressure too. Many women, in particular, are nervous to express that they're not drinking or that they don't want to drink because they think either they'll be rejected by their peers or that their peers will think that they're judging them, so they choose not to say anything or they'll just continue to drink even if they don't really want to. I think it's uncomfortable. I think they don't know how to talk about it easily.

LuAnn Heinen:

Yes, I think it's tricky. I think if you're trying not to drink, then you're going to maybe avoid groups of friends where that's a big part of the activity, and on the other hand, if you are trying to kind of stealth cut back, there's the risk that the friends you're with who are drinking could feel even judged.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

Anecdotally, I think the people who do better or are more successful are the ones who can just tell people, I'm not drinking now or I'm going to get a mocktail or I'm going to have something else, but I still want to be friends with all of you and engage. But to just be able to say it, they tend to do better. It's a legal substance. It really is culturally a big part of all sorts of important events in our lives...celebrations, etc.

LuAnn Heinen:

Passages, congratulations. Yes, champagne for lots of things. Well, I mean unfortunately there's an amazing variety of delicious NA cocktails and somewhat delicious NA wines out there, and Wirecutter just did a whole, the best NA wines of 2023 type thing.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

That's great. I'll have to find that article. So non-alcoholic products. When I was growing up, there was one type of non-alcoholic beer or beverage that was really your choice if you were choosing to have a non-alcoholic beverage, and now there really has been a real explosion of non-alcoholic products. I think some of the big alcohol creators are making their own versions and the craft beer industry is coming out with non-alcoholic craft beers, and importantly, these are being sold in restaurants and in grocery stores and in liquor stores, and they're just more commonly available. I see it as a really hopeful movement that can help normalize options for people and just normalizing that people could choose to have a drink when they're out with their friends or colleagues, that there is a non-alcoholic choice.

LuAnn Heinen:

Just touch on the legacy of the pandemic. We've talked in the past about more people drinking at home, drinking alone perhaps during the pandemic, but there were some policy changes and business practice changes that may have contributed to this ongoing uptick.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

In the immediate, the first months of the pandemic when we had the stay home orders, I know that there were changes in alcohol delivery options. There started to be more common options for ordering alcohol through a service that could be delivered to you. There were changes that have allowed restaurants to allow you to purchase drinks and alcohol with takeout orders and get it to go. Those have been sort of the big ones in terms of changes that I've noticed, but they may have changed the way people were sort of buying in bulk at that time. They started buying alcohol in bulk to have at home, and as you said, just more kind of shifting into drinking alone. We'll have to continue to observe whether these changes will stick around as more permanent policy changes and if they're associated with changes in drinking behaviors for people.

LuAnn Heinen:

Overall, how concerned are you about this trend that we're seeing that's been documented and what strategies would you recommend to support women and prevent alcohol use disorder?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

Right. For mothers specifically increasing support for women who are parents and their transitioning between working and trying to juggle parenting and working and just having more flexible workplace options. I think Covid has actually helped with creating more options for remote work and just flexibility drop-offs or things for your children and getting your job done. I think some of the things we talked about today, normalizing, not always having to drink or defend why you're not drinking and having options for people when you hold a social event or a work event, having options that include non-alcoholic drinks, continuing to develop research that sort of continues to track over time how some of these potential influences from social media and advertising shifts for women may be impacting drinking behaviors. I think we're going to want to keep an eye on that.

LuAnn Heinen:

Any specific considerations for employers and workplaces?

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

For employers, it's important if there are going to be employer-sponsored gatherings and celebrations or parties and events and alcohol is going to be served, that there be numerous other non-alcoholic options available and to just try to really remember that there are very likely people in your community, in your office, who are not drinking or perhaps in recovery or who are struggling with their relationship with alcohol, so anything that can be done to sort of not promote this environment where it's assumed that everyone is drinking, can be really helpful.

LuAnn Heinen:

Thank you so much, Rachel. It was wonderful to have you today. I really appreciate your time.

Dr. Rachel Sayko Adams:

Thank you so much, LuAnn.

LuAnn Heinen:

I've been speaking with Dr. Rachel Seko Adams about midlife binge drinking and alcohol use disorder symptoms in women, which have increased in recent decades. Significantly more women pursuing college degrees and delaying parenting may help explain this concerning trend. You can access the published study, *Cohort Effects of Women's Midlife Binge Drinking and Alcohol Use Disorder Symptoms in the United States: Impacts of changes in timing of parenthood* by clicking on the link in our show notes. Don't miss the accompanying editorial by Dr. Adams discussing wine-mom culture as an overlooked factor. To learn more about the pathways for recovery, listen to our 2022 episode with Dr. John Kelly, *Recovery is Possible and Other Essential Things to Know About Alcohol Use*.

I'm LuAnn Heinen, and this podcast is produced by Business Group on Health, with Connected Social Media. You can help support the podcast by sharing with a colleague and leaving a review.