

Delivering alcohol risk message to women: Considerations of trust by social class

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Background: Trends toward increasing alcohol consumption by midlife women, despite health risks, varies according to social class. Risk messaging must take into consideration social class differences in women's perceptions of the trustworthiness of risk information.

Method: Interviews were conducted with 50 women (aged 45–64) living in South Australia with no history of chronic illness, diversified by drinking levels (light/moderate/heavy) and social class (working/middle/affluent). Women described where they sought health information and how they determined whether information was trustworthy. Thematic analysis investigated the heuristics women used to determine the trustworthiness of messages. Three key heuristics were used: evaluating the credibility of the message/messenger; consideration of competing interests and engagement with 'common sense'. Embedded within each are social class differences with implications for targeted message delivery.

Discussion/conclusions: Affluent women questioned the information source using 'gut-feelings' based on the credentials of the "expert" to decide whether to trust the message; citing familiar health care providers and universities as trustworthy. Middle class women thought social institutions like publicly-funded hospitals and organisations like Cancer Councils are trustworthy. Both distrusted information when provided by entities with competing institutional objectives (e.g., pharmaceutical companies, news media). Working class women were sceptical of scientific information, preferring women's health organisations where they could hear from peers, which improved message credibility. All women wanted 'even-handed' delivery that accounted for the social/emotional contexts of drinking including persistent social acceptability of consuming alcohol (affluent/middle class women) and recognition that consuming alcohol helps with coping in the absence of social supports (working class women). While once-off delivery seems workable for women in affluent/middle classes, working class women require tools to build decision-making capacity.

Implications for practice/policy: Tailoring risk messages to different social class audiences of women could increase the likelihood women are accepting of the message.