

## Bad Chemistry

Smoking and drinking come with health warnings, yet they help you project a cool, sexy image, right? The cliché couldn't be further from the truth.



(Illustration / Juliette Borda)

**By Monica Collins | June 19, 2005**

In old movies and songs, cigarettes and booze created an atmosphere of sexual mystery and allure. Humphrey Bogart and Bette Davis were wreathed in smoke, soaked in Scotch, dripping with desire. Today, apple martinis quell blind date jitters. Smokers form puffing packs and drop pickup lines outside bars. Cocktails and cigarettes stoke fantasy, no matter how many times we're warned they kill.

The warnings are piling up. A government-funded study, published last month in the journal *Archives of Internal Medicine* and led by a Cambridge doctor who teaches at Harvard Medical School, suggests that women who smoke and drink are more likely to be victims of domestic violence.

"Smoking was considered glamorous and wonderful," acknowledges Dr. Megan Gerber, a Cambridge Health Alliance internist and the study's lead author. "Your doctor didn't talk to you about smoking in an exam room in 1940." Her findings sound an alarm for today's doctors to probe more carefully when a female patient reveals she uses cigarettes and alcohol.

The researchers surveyed 2,386 female patients in seven hospitals and a clinic in the Boston area in 2002. Respondents who didn't smoke or drink heavily (which the researchers defined as four or more drinks at least once during the previous 30 days) reported the lowest rates of verbal and physical threats, shoves, slaps, pushes, or forced sex: a 10 percent chance of experiencing abuse over the preceding year and a 39 percent chance during their lifetimes. Women who smoked or drank heavily had higher rates of domestic violence, and women who reported both smoking and drinking heavily faced the most violence: a 27 percent chance of experiencing abuse over the preceding year and a 54 percent chance during their lifetimes. Researchers didn't study whether wealth influenced the rates of violence. And no men were questioned for the study, Gerber says, because women are the likelier victims of domestic trauma.

You don't need to teach at Harvard Medical School to figure out that someone who drinks heavily and smokes could be compensating for inner turmoil. Gerber says: "This is not a new finding that battered women have higher rates of smoking and drinking, but it is a model to alert clinicians to stop and think when they have someone who smokes and drinks and ask them if they are battered." She hopes the study prompts medical professionals - even those not involved in primary patient care - to introduce the

subject of domestic violence and refer women to hot lines, counselors, or social service agencies if they say they have been hurt by their partners.

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 **BY THE NUMBERS: [Chance a woman suffered domestic abuse in the past year](#)**

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It would appear we are best able to conduct our affairs with clear heads and apple juice. Relationships are hard enough without bad chemistry. Karen Jones, a Lawrence relationship coach, says many barriers can prevent women from forming healthy bonds: "Working too much, exercising too much, eating too much, anything."

The new study does not say cigarettes and alcohol lead to domestic violence. But it sure is sobering, making all that cultural imagery of taking a swill and striking a match and a pose look even more dated and deceptive. Romance vanishes when Bette Davis's eyes turn black and blue.