

Boozy boomers

As the number of professional women who drink to excess continues to rise, **Ros Dodd** reports on a new Birmingham service that is setting up alcohol advice workshops in offices across the city

Professional, middle-aged women are the new binge drinkers, according to a raft of recent research.

They are downing almost twice as much alcohol as the lower paid and some are even travelling to clinics in Eastern Europe for drastic implant treatment.

According to the Office for National Statistics, which earlier this year carried out two studies of drinking habits, professional and managerial women are drinking an average of 10.2 units a week – more than a bottle of wine – compared with 6.5 units for manual workers. One in five of all women is drinking more than the “safe” limit of 15 units a week – a rise of 17 per cent on 2008.

The ONS study also found that the middle aged were much more likely to drink every day than younger people.

As many as 50,000 women sought NHS treatment for alcohol problems between 2008 and 2009. Earlier this month it was revealed that professional women secretly battling alcoholism are heading to Eastern Europe for treatment to avoid the stigma of seeking help here. This involves being given a disulfiram (Antabuse) implant that makes them violently ill if they have a drink.

Writing in a national newspaper this month, Charlotte Metcalf said she believed professional, middle-aged women were drinking more to counteract dissatisfaction with their lives.

“Though several of my friends are genuinely happy, the majority – including me – are startled to have arrived in middle age to find we’re not quite where we imagined we’d be,” she wrote. “Long gone are the certainties of our mothers’ generation: marriage and motherhood. Baby boomers were told we could have it all – career and babies. Of course, it didn’t quite work out like that.”

She continued: “By the time we’ve reached our mid-40s, we have realised that the world is primarily the domain of the young. My friends and I drink to forget for a few hours that we are no longer invincible, pretty young girls.”

In Birmingham, where it is thought at least 150,000 people are drinking at hazardous levels, a new specialist service is arranging alcohol advice sessions in the work place.

The A-Team, Birmingham’s Primary Care Alcohol and



● Sam Marsh of Birmingham’s A-Team

We drink to forget that we’re no longer invincible, pretty young girls

Healthy Living Service, is organising workshops for company employees across the city.

“Productivity lost through hangovers is very high – and is likely to be even higher during the World Cup,” says Sam Marsh, the A-Team’s deputy service manager. “A survey found that 40 per cent of people wouldn’t know what to do if there was a staff member with an alcohol problem.”

As well as organising free company workshops, the A-Team can set up “peer support groups” or one-to-one sessions for work colleagues.

“The idea is that people talk about their alcohol consumption,” says Sam. “They can attend up to six sessions and we

hope that by the end of them, people will have cut down the amount they drink or that they will have sought further help.”

Sam says a third of the Bournville-based A-Team’s referrals are women.

“The range of people is huge: we see people who work, people who don’t work and people who keep their drinking secret. It’s too early to see a trend, but it’s certainly true to say that many of the women we see are mothers and workers. There is a pressure on women to manage motherhood and careers.

“A lot of research has gone into women and drinking: I think one reason more women drink at harmful or hazardous levels is the ‘girl power’ thing

– if men can drink, so can women. There’s also the rise in wine consumption, which women are more likely to drink than beer, and the price of alcohol, including wine, has come down in recent years.

“Wine is seen as the acceptable face of drinking, but a lot of people drink at home and home measures are more generous than those you get in a pub or restaurant.”

The A-Team, which was launched last July, offers free and confidential one-to-one sessions, either at its headquarters or at about 35 GP surgeries across Birmingham.

“We cover subjects including alcohol education, identifying triggers for drinking, avoiding high-risk situations, motivational enhancement therapy and referral to other services,” says Sam. “Speaking to one of our highly-trained alcohol workers can help people become more informed and aware of the effects of their drinking – not only on themselves but also on their friends and their community. It can also give people the opportunity to begin to make positive lifestyle changes.

“The public perception is that you manage your drinking until you’re a hopeless alcoholic and then you go down the Alcoholics Anonymous route. What we’re trying to do is to bridge that gap and offer advice and support before it gets that far.”

For more information about the A-Team, visit www.alcohol-services-ateam.org.uk, call 0121 475 8885 or email alcohol@rapt.org.uk.