

HARMFUL USE OF ALCOHOL

The Problem

Harmful use of alcohol is one of the main factors contributing to premature deaths and disability and has a major impact on public health.

- The harmful use of alcohol encompasses several aspects of drinking such as the volume of alcohol drunk over time; the pattern of drinking that includes occasional or regular drinking to intoxication; the drinking context if it increases the public health risks; and the quality or contamination of alcoholic beverages.

Alcohol can damage nearly every organ and system in the body. Its use contributes to more than 60 diseases and conditions.

- In 2002, the harmful use of alcohol was estimated to cause about 2.3 million premature deaths worldwide (3.7% of global deaths).
- It is the fifth leading contributor to the global disease burden.



This problem is associated with numerous social consequences, such as crimes, violence, unemployment and absenteeism. It generates health-care and societal costs and it contributes to disparities in health between and within countries.

Cardiovascular Diseases

One in every five deaths attributable to harmful use of alcohol is due to cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), accounting for more than half a million deaths each year. CVDs account for 10 percent of the total disease burden attributable to alcohol. Hypertension, cardiac arrhythmias and heart failure are all adversely affected by alcohol, with a more complex picture for ischaemic heart disease.

Liver Diseases

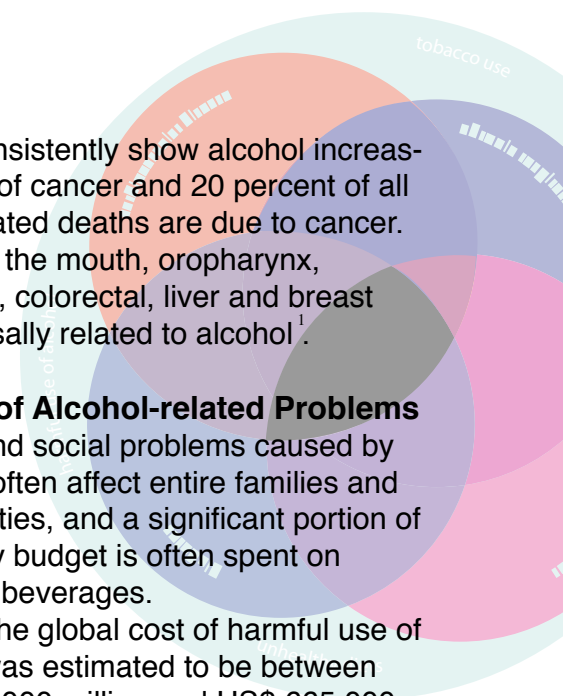
Alcohol consumption has been identified as the leading cause of liver cirrhosis, and liver cirrhosis accounts for 10 percent of the total disease burden attributable to harmful use of alcohol.

Cancer

Studies consistently show alcohol increases the risk of cancer and 20 percent of all alcohol-related deaths are due to cancer. Cancers of the mouth, oropharynx, esophagus, colorectal, liver and breast are all causally related to alcohol¹.

The Cost of Alcohol-related Problems

- Health and social problems caused by drinking often affect entire families and communities, and a significant portion of the family budget is often spent on alcoholic beverages.
- In 2002 the global cost of harmful use of alcohol was estimated to be between US\$ 210 000 million and US\$ 665 000 million, accounting for between 0.6% and 2.0% of global gross domestic product².



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The Solution

“Alcohol problems are of global scale, but they can be reduced and prevented. Amidst rapid globalization, drinking patterns are worsening, often in places with the fewest resources to combat them. Global leadership is needed for this global problem.”

– Dr. Ala Alwan, World Health Organization

The World Health Organization is developing a draft global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol,³ as mandated by the World Health Assembly resolution adopted in 2008⁴. The strategy will include a set of proposed measures recommended for States to implement at the national level, taking into account the national circumstances in each country.

To be effective, strategies and policy options to reduce alcohol-related harm should address levels, patterns and context of alcohol consumption through a combination of measures that target the population at large, vulnerable groups, such as young people and pregnant women, affected individuals and particular problems such as drink-driving and alcohol-related violence. Understanding the harmful use of alcohol's importance in relation to socioeconomic development needs to be better taken into account in policy formulation.

Various strategies and policy options can be chosen depending on regional circumstances, public health problems and needs of individual countries.

Target policy areas include:⁵

- Raising awareness and political commitment
- Health-sector response
- Community action to reduce the harmful use of alcohol
- Drink-driving policies and countermeasures
- Addressing the availability of alcohol
- Addressing marketing of alcoholic beverages
- Pricing policies
- Harm reduction
- Reducing the public health impact of illegally and informally produced alcohol.



1 The Lancet Oncology, Volume 8, Issue 4, Pages 292 - 293, April 2007
 2 Global assessment of public-health problems caused by harmful use of alcohol. WHO, 5 April 2007. Available at: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA60/A60_14add1-en.pdf
 3 http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/activities/globalstrategy/en/index.html
 4 WHA61.4. Strategies to reduce the harmful use of alcohol. Available at: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA61-REC1/A61_Rec1-part2-en.pdf
 5 Strategies to reduce the harmful use of alcohol, WHO, 20 March 2008. Available at: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/A61/A61_13-en.pdf