

Harmful use of alcohol kills more than 3 million people each year, most of them men

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News Release

More than 3 million people died as a result of harmful use of alcohol in 2016, according to a report released by the World Health Organization (WHO) today. This represents 1 in 20 deaths. More than three quarters of these deaths were among men. Overall, the harmful use of alcohol causes more than 5% of the global disease burden.

WHO's [Global status report on alcohol and health 2018](#) presents a comprehensive picture of alcohol consumption and the disease burden attributable to alcohol worldwide. It also describes what countries are doing to reduce this burden.

“Far too many people, their families and communities suffer the consequences of the harmful use of alcohol through violence, injuries, mental health problems and diseases like cancer and stroke,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of WHO. “It’s time to step up action to prevent this serious threat to the development of healthy societies.”

Of all deaths attributable to alcohol, 28% were due to injuries, such as those from traffic crashes, self-harm and interpersonal violence; 21% due to digestive disorders; 19% due to cardiovascular diseases, and the remainder due to infectious diseases, cancers, mental disorders and other health conditions.

Despite some positive global trends in the prevalence of heavy episodic drinking and number of alcohol-related deaths since 2010, the overall burden of disease and injuries caused by the harmful use of alcohol is unacceptably high, particularly in the European Region and the Region of Americas.

Globally an estimated 237 million men and 46 million women suffer from alcohol-use disorders with the highest prevalence among men and women in the European region (14.8% and 3.5%) and the Region of Americas (11.5% and 5.1%). Alcohol-use disorders are more common in high-income countries.

Global consumption predicted to increase in the next 10 years

An estimated 2.3 billion people are current drinkers. Alcohol is consumed by more than half of the population in three WHO regions – the Americas, Europe and the Western Pacific. Europe has the highest per capita consumption in the world, even though its per capita consumption has decreased by more than 10% since 2010. Current trends and projections point to an expected increase in global alcohol per capita consumption in the next 10 years, particularly in the South-East Asia and Western Pacific Regions and the Region of the Americas.

How much alcohol are people drinking?

The average daily consumption of people who drink alcohol is 33 grams of pure alcohol a day, roughly equivalent to 2 glasses (each of 150 ml) of wine, a large (750 ml) bottle of beer or two shots (each of 40 ml) of spirits.

Worldwide, more than a quarter (27%) of all 15–19-year-olds are current drinkers. Rates of current drinking are highest among 15–19-year-olds in Europe (44%), followed by the Americas (38%) and the Western Pacific (38%). School surveys indicate that, in many countries, alcohol use starts before the age of 15 with very small differences between boys and girls.

Worldwide, 45% of total recorded alcohol is consumed in the form of spirits. Beer is the second alcoholic beverage in terms of pure alcohol consumed (34%) followed by wine (12%). Worldwide there have been only minor changes in preferences of alcoholic beverages since 2010. The largest changes took place in Europe, where consumption of spirits decreased by 3% whereas that of wine and beer increased.

In contrast, more than half (57%, or 3.1 billion people) of the global population aged 15 years and over had abstained from drinking alcohol in the previous 12 months.

More countries need to take action

“All countries can do much more to reduce the health and social costs of the harmful use of alcohol,” said Dr Vladimir Poznyak, Coordinator of WHO’s Management of Substance Abuse unit. “Proven, cost-effective actions include increasing taxes on alcoholic drinks, bans or restrictions on alcohol advertising, and restricting the physical availability of alcohol.”

Higher-income countries are more likely to have introduced these policies, raising issues of global health equity and underscoring the need for greater support to low- and middle-income countries.

Almost all (95%) countries have alcohol excise taxes, but fewer than half of them use other price strategies such as banning below-cost selling or volume discounts. The majority of countries have some type of restriction on beer advertising, with total bans

most common for television and radio but less common for the internet and social media.

“We would like to see Member States implement creative solutions that will save lives, such as taxing alcohol and restricting advertising. We must do more to cut demand and reach the target set by governments of a 10% relative reduction in consumption of alcohol globally between 2010 and 2025,” added Dr Tedros.

Reducing the harmful use of alcohol will help achieve a number of health-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those for maternal and child health, infectious diseases, noncommunicable diseases and mental health, injuries and poisonings.