International Agency for Research on Cancer

World Health Organization

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New study links alcohol consumption to increased risk of pancreatic cancer

Lyon, France, 23 May 2025 – A large international consortium of prospective studies, led by researchers from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and partner institutions, has examined the relationship between alcohol consumption and the risk of developing pancreatic cancer. The findings, published in *PLOS Medicine*,[1] reveal a modest but significant association between alcohol intake and risk of pancreatic cancer, independent of sex and smoking status.

The analysis pooled data from 30 population-based cohorts across four continents (Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America). The cohorts included nearly 2.5 million participants without cancer at baseline, recruited between 1980 and 2013 at the median age of 57 years. Over a median follow-up period of 16 years, 10 067 incident pancreatic cancer cases were recorded.

“Alcohol consumption is a known carcinogen, but until now, the evidence linking it specifically to pancreatic cancer has been considered inconclusive,” says Dr Pietro Ferrari, Head of the Nutrition and Metabolism Branch at IARC and senior author of the study. “Our findings provide new evidence that pancreatic cancer may be another cancer type associated with alcohol consumption, a connection that has been underestimated until now.”

Key findings

Previous prospective studies have suggested a harmful role of alcohol in the development of pancreatic cancer, particularly at intake levels of more than 30 grams of ethanol per day (g/day), which is equivalent to about two standard alcoholic drinks per day.

This new study found that each increase of 10 g/day in alcohol consumption was associated with a 3% increase in risk of pancreatic cancer.

More specifically, among women, compared with alcohol consumption of 0.1–5 g/day (weak intake), intake of 15–30 g/day was associated with a 12% increase in risk of pancreatic cancer. Among men, compared with alcohol consumption of 0.1–5 g/day, intake of 30–60 g/day was associated with a 15% increase in risk of pancreatic cancer, and intake of more than 60 g/day was associated with a 36% increase in risk.

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[1] Naudin S, Wang M, Dimou N, Ebrahimi E, Genkinger J, Adami HO, et al. (2025). Alcohol intake and pancreatic cancer risk: an analysis from 30 prospective studies across Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. *PLoS Med*. Published online 20 May 2025; https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1004590

“Alcohol is often consumed in combination with tobacco use, which has led to questions about whether smoking might confound the relationship,” adds Dr Ferrari. “However, our analysis showed that the association between alcohol and risk of pancreatic cancer was observed even among non-smokers, indicating that alcohol consumption itself is an independent risk factor for pancreatic cancer.”

Pancreatic cancer: a growing global concern

Pancreatic cancer has emerged as a significant public health challenge in recent years. Although pancreatic cancer is only the 12th most common cancer type globally, in 2022 it accounted for about 5% of all cancer-related deaths worldwide, because of its late diagnosis and resulting high fatality rate.

Pancreatic cancer incidence and mortality rates in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, and Eastern Asia are 4–5 times those in other regions. Despite advances in cancer treatment, little improvement in pancreatic cancer survival has been observed.

“Although there are some established risk factors, such as tobacco use, excess body fatness, chronic pancreatitis, and diabetes, the causes of pancreatic cancer remain poorly understood. This study adds important new insights into the role of alcohol consumption in pancreatic cancer onset,” says Dr Ferrari. “Further research is needed to better understand the role of lifetime alcohol consumption, for example during early adulthood, and the influence of specific consumption patterns, such as binge drinking.”

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The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is part of the World Health Organization. Its mission is to coordinate and conduct research on the causes of human cancer, the mechanisms of carcinogenesis, and to develop scientific strategies for cancer control. The Agency is involved in both epidemiological and laboratory research and disseminates scientific information through publications, meetings, courses, and fellowships. If you wish your name to be removed from our press release emailing list, please write to com@iarc.who.int.