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Alcohol: a major preventable cause of cancer (IARC Evidence Summary Brief No. 6)

Lyon, France, 8 October 2025 – In its sixth Evidence Summary Brief,¹ the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) highlights alcohol as a major preventable cause of cancer. Despite growing public health concern, alcohol consumption continues to increase in several world regions, including the Americas, the Western Pacific, sub-Saharan Africa, and South-East Asia. Consumption is currently highest in Europe, where awareness remains low: less than half of people know that alcohol can cause cancer.

In this Evidence Summary Brief, IARC scientists synthesize key evidence on the global burden of cancer attributable to alcohol, its economic impact, and effective interventions to reduce this burden. In addition, the Brief provides a clear call for policy action.

Key evidence

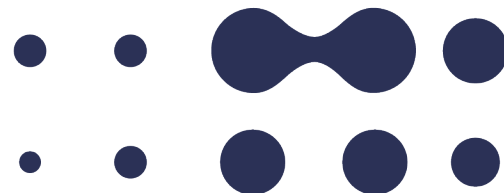
Alcohol consumption is a major public health concern, in part due to its well-established role in increasing the risk of cancer. In 1988, the *IARC Monographs* programme classified alcoholic beverages as carcinogenic to humans (Group 1).

The key evidence messages of the Brief are the following:

- Drinking alcohol increases the risk of at least seven cancer types and causes an estimated 4% of all new cancers globally per year.
- Even low levels of drinking increase cancer risk.
- Deaths from cancer attributable to alcohol cost about €4.6 billion in lost productivity in the European Union per year.
- Reducing or quitting alcohol consumption reduces the risk of alcohol-related cancer.
- Policies that increase taxes or prices, decrease availability, or restrict marketing of alcoholic beverages are effective in lowering alcohol consumption if they are properly implemented and enforced.

“Alcohol consumption is a cause of more than 200 diseases and injuries, including cancer,” says Dr Harriet Rumgay, a scientist in the Cancer Surveillance Branch at IARC. “Reducing alcohol intake reduces cancer risk. There is no amount of alcohol intake that is entirely without risk.”

¹ IARC (2025). Alcohol: a major preventable cause of cancer (IARC Evidence Summary Brief No. 6). Available from: https://www.iarc.who.int/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/IARC_Evidence_Summary_Brief_6.pdf.



Global burden of cancer due to alcohol and its economic cost

In 2020, alcohol consumption was linked to 741 000 new cases of cancer worldwide, about 4% of all new cancer diagnoses. Men accounted for more than three quarters (78%) of this cancer burden.

The cancer types with the most cases linked to alcohol consumption were oesophageal cancer (190 000 cases), liver cancer (155 000 cases), and female breast cancer (98 000 cases).

The proportions of alcohol-attributable cancers were highest in men in regions such as Eastern Asia (9%) and Central and Eastern Europe (8%) and in women in Central and Eastern Europe (3%), Australia and New Zealand (3%), and Western Europe (3%). The proportions of alcohol-related cancers were lowest in both men and women in Northern Africa and Western Asia (< 1%).

In terms of levels of alcohol consumption, “risky” drinking (2–6 alcoholic drinks per day) and “heavy” drinking (> 6 alcoholic drinks per day) accounted for the majority of cases, but even “moderate” drinking (< 2 alcoholic drinks per day) caused more than 100 000 new cancer cases globally in 2020.

Economically, alcohol-related cancer deaths were estimated to cost about €4.6 billion in lost productivity in Europe (the European Union plus Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) in 2018. However, this is likely to be an underestimate of the true cost, which would be higher if factors such as losses in unpaid work and health-care expenses were included.

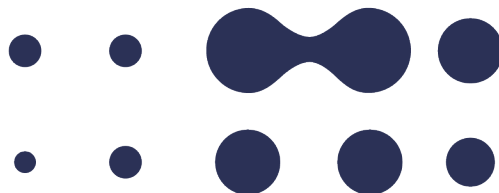
Alcohol reduction for cancer prevention and effectiveness of policies

In 2023, a group of experts convened by IARC reviewed and evaluated the available evidence and concluded that reducing or quitting alcohol consumption lowers the risk of oral cavity cancer and oesophageal cancer; the risk decreases with the duration of quitting. The benefits for other alcohol-related cancer types are less certain.

In 2024, another group of experts convened by IARC evaluated the available evidence on the effectiveness of selected alcohol policies in reducing population-level alcohol consumption. The experts concluded that the following interventions were effective:

- interventions that increase taxes, set minimum prices, or raise the minimum legal purchase or drinking age for alcohol;
- interventions that reduce alcohol outlet density or days or hours of sale;
- strong bans on alcohol marketing;
- total bans on alcohol sales;
- government alcohol monopolies or other coordinated multiple alcohol policy interventions.

A recent modelling study in collaboration with IARC scientists showed that doubling alcohol excise taxes could have prevented 6% of new alcohol-related cancer cases and deaths in Europe in 2019. The greatest potential benefit was seen for female breast cancer and colorectal cancer.



Given the generally low levels of alcohol taxation in many countries in Europe, increasing excise duties represents a considerable and underutilized opportunity to tackle alcohol consumption and ultimately reduce the cancer burden attributable to alcoholic beverages.

“Alcohol policies that increase taxes or prices, decrease availability, or restrict marketing are effective in reducing alcohol consumption,” says Dr Daniela Mariosa, a scientist in the Evidence Synthesis and Classification Branch at IARC.

Call to action

Drawing from the latest scientific evidence, this Evidence Summary Brief highlights key findings from IARC-led research and calls for urgent action from governments, civil society, and health professionals. It stresses the need for evidence-based alcohol policies such as taxation and restrictions to pricing, availability, and marketing, to curb consumption.

“Raising awareness about the cancer risks of alcohol and the fact that no level of drinking is safe is critical,” says Dr Béatrice Lauby-Secretan, deputy head of the Evidence Synthesis and Classification Branch at IARC. “Everyone has a role to play in changing the current norms and values surrounding alcohol consumption.”

Note to the Editor

This IARC Evidence Summary Brief is the sixth in a series of scientific Evidence Summary Briefs published by IARC to call attention to the findings of evidence-based studies in key aspects of cancer prevention. IARC Evidence Summary Briefs are available from <https://www.iarc.who.int/evidence-summary-briefs-series/>.

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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 terrassev@iarc.who.int.