

PRESS RELEASE No. 372

14 October 2025

## The science is clear: smart alcohol policies can prevent cancer

**Copenhagen, Denmark, 14 October 2025** – Alcohol causes cancer, draining economies and taking a toll on societies across the WHO European Region. Today, WHO/Europe and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) deliver a simple message to governments: “Strong alcohol policies are among the smartest investments you can make.” These policies save lives, save money, take effect quickly, and are now backed up by one of the world’s most rigorous scientific reviews.

Volume 20 of the *IARC Handbooks of Cancer Prevention* marks the first time IARC has evaluated the prevention of alcohol-related cancers. Volume 20A evaluates the impact of reducing or quitting consumption on cancer risk, and Volume 20B focuses on alcohol policies to reduce consumption.

Produced by an independent working group of international experts through a rigorous and transparent process free from conflicts of interest, the *IARC Handbooks* provide comprehensive reviews and consensus evaluations of cancer preventive actions. Governments worldwide can use them to develop recommendations and policies.

The outcomes of Volume 20 leave no doubt: alcohol taxation, restricted availability and strong marketing bans reduce alcohol consumption at the population level and, in turn, reduce the cancer burden.

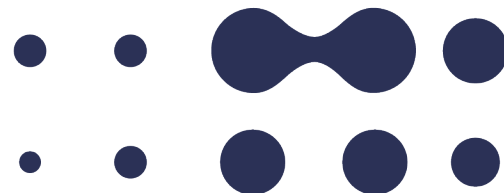
### What’s at stake

The European Union (EU) is the subregion with the heaviest alcohol consumption in the world, and where cancer is now also the leading cause of death. In 2020 alcohol caused 111 300 new cancer cases in the EU, including colorectal (36 900), breast (24 200) and oral cavity (12 400) cancers. Almost 70% of cases were in men.

In 2018 the cost of premature deaths from alcohol-related cancers alone reached €4.58 billion across the EU. This is only a fraction of alcohol’s broader toll: hospitalizations, injuries, violence and lost productivity cost societies tens of billions more.

“The WHO European Region, and especially countries of the EU, are paying too high a price for alcohol in preventable cancers and broken families, as well as costing billions to taxpayers,” said Dr Gundo Weiler, Director for Prevention and Health Promotion at WHO/Europe.

“In 2020 alcohol contributed to more than 93 000 cancer deaths in our Region alone. Some call alcohol a ‘cultural heritage’, but disease, death and disability should not be normalized as part of European culture. With this volume of the *Handbooks*, we have the clearest possible evidence on how to turn the tide,” Dr Weiler added.



### **What's new in the *IARC Handbooks***

Alcoholic beverages were classified as carcinogenic to humans (Group 1) several decades ago. With this latest volume of the *Handbooks*, international experts have demonstrated that alcohol policies reduce consumption, and that reducing or quitting alcohol use reduces cancer risk.

“Alcohol causes at least 7 types of cancer,” said Dr Elisabete Weiderpass, Director of IARC. “Volume 20 of the *IARC Handbooks* is a historical milestone: developed in 2 parts, it establishes with no further doubt that population-wide alcohol policies reduce drinking, and that reduced drinking lowers cancer risk.”

### **Reducing alcohol consumption – which policies work?**

For Volume 20B, an international working group of independent experts evaluated studies assessing the effect on alcohol consumption of higher taxes, pricing increases, availability restrictions and marketing bans, as well as coordinated multiple-policy interventions.

The working group concluded that the following alcohol policy interventions lead to population-level reductions in alcohol consumption:

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

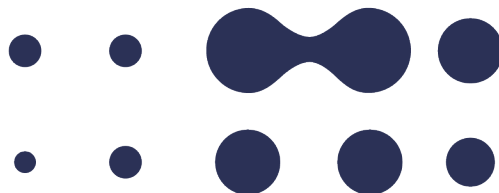
### **Benefits of implementing these policies**

These findings will help governments implement effective policies that:

- save lives – reducing population-wide drinking prevents disease and premature death;
- save money – policies such as taxation have been shown not only to reduce alcohol consumption and related harm but also to raise government revenues, which can be reinvested into health and recovery;
- work quickly – implementation shows results within 5 years, which often corresponds to 1 electoral cycle; and
- are backed by science – IARC’s expert evaluations are based on independent and robust evidence and serve as a global standard.

### **A political imperative**

Despite the mounting evidence behind the most effective policies, they remain underutilized in the Region. Volume 20 equips governments with evidence to act decisively to protect public health, strengthen economies and deliver changes that populations will see within a single political term.



Importantly, reducing overall consumption is only part of the solution. Millions of individuals in the Region have alcohol use disorder, and only a fraction of them receive treatment. Expanding access to effective, evidence-based treatment and support is essential. These work best when paired with early detection and intervention, and strong policies that curb the overall availability and promotion of alcohol.

“The WHO European Region cannot afford the illusion that consuming alcohol is harmless,” emphasized Dr Weiler. “Along with a better understanding of the real impact of alcohol, we now have a lot more evidence on how we can actually reduce alcohol-attributable cancer cases and deaths in our Region. And the scale of the potential lives saved is staggering – into the tens of thousands.”

### High-level launch event

Volume 20 of the *IARC Handbooks* will be officially launched at UN City in Copenhagen, Denmark, during a 2-day, high-level event convened by WHO/Europe and IARC within the scope of the WHO–EU Evidence into Action Alcohol Project (EVID-ACTION). Policy-makers, researchers, youth advocates and civil society will gather to translate evidence into urgent political action.

The launch event on 14 October 2025 will be streamed online. Please register via the link to join.

### Links

Launch of the *IARC Handbooks of Cancer Prevention* (Volume 20B) and EVID-ACTION multistakeholder meeting

[https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2025/10/14/default-calendar/launch-of-the-iarc-handbook-for-cancer-prevention-\(volume-20b\)-and-evid-action-multistakeholder-meeting](https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2025/10/14/default-calendar/launch-of-the-iarc-handbook-for-cancer-prevention-(volume-20b)-and-evid-action-multistakeholder-meeting)

Registration link

[https://who.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_yCTsk2GbTpCCy1i4ONI-1w#/](https://who.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_yCTsk2GbTpCCy1i4ONI-1w#/)

*IARC Handbooks* Volume 20A (2024)

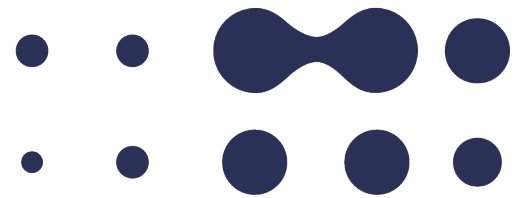
<https://publications.iarc.who.int/638>

*IARC Handbooks* Volume 20B (2025)

<https://publications.iarc.who.int/653>

Webinar series: Reduction of alcohol consumption and cancer prevention: what can we learn from the new handbooks from the International Agency for Research on Cancer?

<https://www.who.int/europe/news-room/events/item/2025/05/27/default-calendar/webinar-series--reduction-of-alcohol-consumption-and-cancer-prevention--what-can-we-learn-from-the-new-handbooks-from-the-international-agency-for-research-on-cancer>



*IARC Handbooks of Cancer Prevention*

<https://handbooks.iarc.who.int/news/>

*The Lancet Regional Health Europe* – Quick buys for prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases (2025)

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762\(25\)00073-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanepi/article/PIIS2666-7762(25)00073-0/fulltext)

Global Cancer Observatory

<https://gco.iarc.who.int/en>

**For more information, please contact**

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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](mailto:terrassev@iarc.who.int).