



Media release

Embargoed until 00.01 Friday 22 March 2013

Increase in alcohol-related cancers despite well-established link

A new report from the Alcohol Health Alliance UK (AHA) has found that hospital admissions for alcohol-related cancer in England have jumped 28% in just eight years.

The report, *Alcohol and cancer*, highlights figures showing that the number of admissions to hospital for alcohol-related cancer increased from 29,400 in 2002/03 to 37,600 in 2010/11.

The AHA, which represents more than thirty leading health organisations, says that despite the link between alcohol and cancer having been well-established for many decades, four out of ten people are still not aware that alcohol is a risk factor in cancer.

Commenting on the report, Sir Ian Gilmore, chair of the AHA, said:

‘This report clearly demonstrates that alcohol is one of the most important preventable causes of cancer in the UK and provides yet more evidence of the need for strong government action, including a minimum unit price for alcohol.

‘The UK’s unhealthy relationship with alcohol is putting more and more strain on the NHS, police and families as the nation struggles to cope with the rising tide of harm caused by alcohol misuse.’

Each year 12,500 people are diagnosed with alcohol related cancers in the UK, and around 3,200 people die from these diseases. Alcohol can cause seven types of cancer; mouth, larynx, oesophagus, pharynx, bowel, breast and liver.

The report highlights that people in the UK are drinking much more than they were fifty years ago, with alcohol consumption per head in the UK increased by 91% between 1960 and 2010. In 2010, 26% of men and 17% of women reported drinking above the amounts recommended in UK guidelines in an average week.

Commenting on the report, Sarah Woolnough, Cancer Research UK’s executive director of policy and information, said:

‘There’s strong scientific evidence that alcohol increases the risk of a range of different cancers – but this still comes as a surprise to many drinkers. It’s not just heavier drinkers who are at risk - the more you can cut down on alcohol, the better. Cancer Research UK recommends that people try to stay within recommended government guidelines to reduce their risk of alcohol-related cancer; this means no more three to four units a day for men or two to three units for women.



‘Simple things like having more drink-free days, or swapping every other drink for something soft, could really help cut the risk of cancer. We are also calling on the Government to take steps to make alcohol less affordable and attractive which will help reduce the amount of alcohol people drink.’

The more alcohol a person drinks, the higher their risk of developing cancer, but there is no level of drinking that can be considered ‘safe’ from the risk of cancer. Research has found that people who consumed up to an average of about 1.5 units a day, equivalent to just over one bottle of wine a week, had increased risks of mouth and upper throat, food pipe and breast cancers.

Alcohol has a wide range of complex effects on the body, some of which are likely to explain how it can cause cancer. The following processes are supported by good-quality evidence:

- Ethanol is converted into a chemical called acetaldehyde in the body, which causes cancer by damaging our cells’ DNA.
- Alcohol acts as a solvent that helps the body absorb other carcinogens, such as those found in tobacco.
- Alcohol increases oestrogen levels in women, which can in turn increase the risk of breast cancer.

The report authors call for both population-wide and individual level interventions to reduce the number of alcohol-related cancer cases and deaths in the UK.

At a population level, the report calls for the implementation of the three major policy recommendations from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE):

- Increase the real price of alcohol
- Make alcohol less readily available for purchase
- Restrict the marketing of alcohol products to children.

On an individual level, the report recommends that screening individuals to identify those who may require additional support, brief interventions, and referrals are fully implemented. Individuals who drink should be supported to:

- Understand how their current level of drinking affects their risk of cancer
- Drink within current weekly guidelines: this may include reducing both the amount they drink regularly and the number of days a week that they drink
- Address other lifestyle factors that may be working with alcohol to increase their risk of cancer, such as smoking.

Notes to editors

For further information and a copy of the full report, please contact Andrew McCracken, RCP communications and new media adviser, on 0203 075 1354, 07990 745 608, or andrew.mccracken@rcplondon.ac.uk.



Minimum unit price; the facts

- Under a minimum 50p per unit, moderate drinkers would spend just 28p extra per week on alcohol.
- After 10 years, a minimum 50p per unit will save 3,393 lives a year.
- After 10 years, a minimum 50p per unit will reduce hospital admissions by 97,900 a year.
- After 10 years, a minimum 50p per unit will cut 45,800 crimes a year.

Members of the Alcohol Health Alliance:

- Academy of Medical Royal Colleges
- Action on Addiction
- Alcohol Concern
- Alcohol Focus Scotland
- Balance North East
- British Association for the Study of the Liver
- British Liver Trust
- British Medical Association
- British Society of Gastroenterology
- Centre for Mental Health
- College of Emergency Medicine
- Drink Wise North West
- Faculty of Dental Surgery
- Faculty of Occupational Medicine
- Institute of Alcohol Studies
- Medical Council on Alcohol
- National Addiction Centre
- National Heart Forum
- National Organisation for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome
- Royal College of Anaesthetists
- Royal College of General Practitioners
- Royal College of Nursing
- Royal College of Physicians Edinburgh
- Royal College of Physicians London
- Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, Glasgow
- Royal College of Psychiatrists
- Royal College of Surgeons London
- Royal Pharmaceutical Society
- Royal Society for Public Health
- Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems



- Scottish Intercollegiate Group on Alcohol
- UK Faculty of Public Health