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Drinking over recommended limit 'raises cancer risk'



Many people do not know that drinking alcohol can increase their cancer risk.

Drinking more than a pint of beer a day can substantially increase the risk of some cancers, research suggests.

The Europe-wide study of 363,988 people reported in the British Medical Journal found one in 10 of all cancers in men and one in 33 in women were caused by past or current alcohol intake.

More than 18% of alcohol-related cancers in men and about 4% in women were linked to excessive drinking.

The Department of Health said it was taking action to reduce drinking.

Cancer charities say people should limit their drinking to lower the risk.

The study calculated that in 2008 current and past drinking habits were responsible for about 13,000 cancer cases in the UK, out of a total of 304,000 cases.

Previous research has shown a link between alcohol consumption and cancers of the oesophagus, liver, bowel and female breast.

When alcohol is broken down by the body it produces a chemical which can damage DNA, increasing the chance of developing cancer.

Glass too far

[The latest research](#) found that individuals who drank more than two standard drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women were particularly at risk of alcohol-related cancers.



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Dr Kat Arney, Cancer Research UK: "The more you drink, the greater the risk"

A standard drink contains about 12g of alcohol, which is equivalent to a 125ml glass of wine or a half pint of beer.

Yet NHS guidelines are a little more relaxed, saying that men should drink no more than three

to four units a day while women should not go above two to three units a day.

Of the cancers known to be linked to alcohol, the researchers suggest that 40% to 98% occurred in people who drank more than the recommended maximum.

The results were gathered as part of a study following 363,988 men and women in eight European countries aged between 35 and 70.

The European Prospective Investigation into Cancer study tracked their levels of drinking and how this affected their risk of cancer.

Researchers then looked at figures on how much people drank in each country, including the UK, taken from the World Health Organization.

The study focused on France, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Greece, Germany, Denmark and the UK.

Madlen Schutze, lead researcher and study author, from the German Institute of Human Nutrition, said that many cancer cases could be avoided if alcohol consumption was limited.

"And even more cancer cases would be prevented if people reduced their alcohol intake to below recommended guidelines or stopped drinking alcohol at all," she said.

'Best data'

Cancer Research UK director of health information Sara Hiom said that many people did not know that drinking alcohol could increase their cancer risk.

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“Start Quote

I think there will have to be some form of tougher regulation by government”

End Quote Professor Sir Ian Gilmore UK Alcohol Health Alliance

"In the last 10 years, mouth cancer has become much more common and one reason for this could be because of higher levels of drinking - as this study reflects.

"Along with being a non-smoker and keeping a healthy bodyweight, cutting back on alcohol is one of the most important ways of lowering your cancer risk."

Cancer Partners UK medical director Prof Karol Sikora said the message had to be "drink occasionally, but not regularly".

"This is the best data we've got and we're ever likely to get.

"The take-home message is that the more alcohol you drink, some of the common cancers - the four cancers that have been identified - do increase, and that's worrying. So the message has to be 'look at drinking habits, and reduce.'"

The Department of Health is set to publish an alcohol strategy in the summer.

Professor Sir Ian Gilmore, former president of the Royal College of Physicians and chairman

of the UK Alcohol Health Alliance, called for tougher regulation to curb alcohol consumption.

He told the BBC: "It is yet another piece of evidence that really leads us to conclude that sitting back and waiting for people to change their habits, perhaps with voluntary partnerships with the drinks industry included in policies, will not bring about results.

"If we really want to see preventable deaths coming down in the next decade or so, I think there will have to be some form of tougher regulation by government."

It is expected to include plans to stop supermarkets selling cheap alcohol and tighten up licensing laws which were relaxed under the previous government.