

The Problem

Cancer is the leading cause of death in economically developed countries and the second leading cause in economically developing countries.^{1,2} Alcohol consumption is one of the top-10 risks for worldwide burden of disease and disability, and is responsible for 3.8% of global deaths³ and nearly 4% of all U.S. cancer deaths.⁴ There is no determined safe threshold for alcohol consumption and cancer risk.^{5,6,7}

- The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified beverage alcohol as a Group 1 (cancerous to humans) carcinogen since 1988.^{5,8}
- Globally, alcohol-attributable cancers account for 25% of alcohol-related deaths for women and 18% for men – making it one of the largest entirely avoidable risk factors.⁹
- Seven types of cancer are significantly associated with alcohol consumption:⁴
 - Cancer of the oral cavity
 - Pharynx
 - Larynx
 - Esophagus
 - Colorectum
 - Liver
 - Female breast
- Breast cancer is the cause for the majority of female alcohol-related cancer deaths. High alcohol intake is a risk factor for developing cancer, and also has a negative effect on the course of the disease.¹⁰
- Head and neck cancers account for the majority of alcohol related cancers among men.⁹
- The combination of alcohol and tobacco use significantly increases cancer risk for head and neck cancers; however, the positive association of these cancers and alcohol consumption exists independent of tobacco use.
- Alcohol consumption is also associated with the incidence of cancer of the pancreas.^{3,4}
- Increased consumption of alcohol on a regular basis increases the cancer risk in both men and women. An increase of just 10g per day is associated with significantly greater cancer risk.^{2-4,11}
- Light and moderate drinking is associated with greater cancer risk for some cancers when compared to non-drinkers.^{10,12-14}
- While heavy drinking presents the greatest cancer risk, daily alcohol consumption of up to 1.5 drinks accounts for 26-35% of alcohol-attributable cancer deaths in the United States.⁴
- Alcohol-attributable cancers resulted in an average of 17-19 years of potential life lost per death.⁴

Bottom Line

Alcohol use is a leading cause of cancer – and one of the largest avoidable risk factors – even when used moderately. Due to the relationship between alcohol consumption and cancer (as well as many other noncommunicable diseases, health problems, and substantial economic costs), the costs of alcohol-related disease and harm significantly outweigh any purported health benefits of moderate drinking.

References

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