

Extract from “Food, Nutrition, Physical Activity, and the Prevention of Cancer: a Global Perspective.” published by World Cancer Research Fund and American Institute for Cancer Research

RECOMMENDATION 6

ALCOHOLIC DRINKS

Limit alcoholic drinks¹

PUBLIC HEALTH GOAL

Proportion of the population drinking more than the recommended limits to be reduced by one third every 10 years^{1 2}

PERSONAL RECOMMENDATION

If alcoholic drinks are consumed, limit consumption to no more than two drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women^{1 2 3}

¹ This recommendation takes into account that there is a likely protective effect for coronary heart disease

² Children and pregnant women not to consume alcoholic drinks

³ One ‘drink’ contains about 10–15 grams of ethanol

Evidence

The evidence that all types of alcoholic drink are a cause of a number of cancers is now stronger than it was in the mid-1990s.

The evidence that alcoholic drinks are a cause of cancers of the mouth, pharynx, and larynx, oesophagus, and breast (pre- and postmenopausal) is convincing. The evidence that alcoholic drinks are a cause of colorectal cancer in men is convincing. Alcoholic drinks are a probable cause of liver cancer, and of colorectal cancer in women. It is unlikely that alcoholic drinks have a substantial adverse effect on the risk of kidney cancer. Also see chapter 4.8.

Justification

The evidence on cancer justifies a recommendation not to drink alcoholic drinks. Other evidence shows that modest amounts of alcoholic drinks are likely to reduce risk of coronary heart disease.

The evidence does not show a clear level of consumption of alcoholic drinks below which there is no increase in risk of the cancers it causes. This means that, based solely on the evidence on cancer, even small amounts of alcoholic drinks should be avoided. Further details of evidence and judgements can be found in Chapter 4. In framing the recommendation here, the Panel has also taken into account the evidence that modest amounts of alcoholic drinks are likely to protect against coronary heart disease, as described in Chapter 10.

The evidence shows that all alcoholic drinks have the same effect. Data do not suggest any significant difference depending on the type of drink. This

recommendation therefore covers all alcoholic drinks, whether beers, wines, spirits (liquors), or other alcoholic drinks. The important factor is the amount of ethanol consumed.

The Panel emphasises that children and pregnant women should not consume alcoholic drinks.

Public health goal

The points here are additional to those made in the footnotes to the goal above.

Proportion of the population drinking more than the recommended limits to be reduced by one third every 10 years

The context for this goal, which like the others specified here is designed as a guide for national and other population policies, is the current common rise in regular and heavy consumption of alcoholic drinks, including among young people. The focus of the goal is especially on those consuming above the recommended limits, rather than regular modest drinkers. Again as above, the goal proposes a timeframe. Achievement of this goal requires substantial support from regulatory authorities, the manufacturers of alcoholic drinks, and from the owners of bars and other locations where alcoholic drinks are sold and consumed. Policy-makers are encouraged to frame goals according to their specific circumstances.

Personal recommendation

The points here are additional to those made in the footnotes to the recommendation above.

If alcoholic drinks are consumed, limit consumption to no more than two drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women

Modest consumption of alcoholic drinks has been shown to be protective against coronary heart disease compared to no drinking, with higher levels of drinking in some cases showing increased risk. Nevertheless, no authoritative body has made specific recommendations for alcohol consumption to avoid coronary heart disease because of the adverse biological, behavioural, physical, social, and other effects of higher levels of consumption.

For those who do consume alcoholic drinks, no more than two drinks per day (men) and no more than one drink per day (women) are the recommended limits. These limits are expressed as amounts per day, because occasional heavy drinking (say, at weekends) while at other times alcoholic drinks are not consumed, is particularly likely to lead to adverse outcomes.

Guidance

For those people who choose to consume alcoholic drinks, the Panel endorses the advice of other authoritative bodies. These generally advise an upper limit of around two drinks per day for men and one for women.

NB One ‘drink’ is almost two UK units.