

Alcohol Kills More than AIDS, TB or Violence: WHO

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Yet alcohol control policies are weak and remain a low priority for most governments despite drinking's heavy toll on society from road accidents, violence, disease, child neglect and job absenteeism, it said.

Approximately 2.5 million people die each year from alcohol related causes, the WHO said in its "Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health."

"The harmful use of alcohol is especially fatal for younger age groups and alcohol is the world's leading risk factor for death among males aged 15-59," the report found.

In Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), every fifth death is due to harmful drinking, the highest rate.

Binge drinking, which often leads to risky behavior, is now prevalent in Brazil, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa and Ukraine, and rising elsewhere, according to the WHO.

"Worldwide, about 11 percent of drinkers have weekly heavy episodic drinking occasions, with men outnumbering women by four to one. Men consistently engage in hazardous drinking at much higher levels than women in all regions," the report said.

Health ministers from the WHO's 193 member states agreed last May to try to curb binge drinking and other growing forms of excessive alcohol use through higher taxes on alcoholic drinks and tighter marketing restrictions.

DISEASE AND INJURY

Alcohol is a causal factor in 60 types of diseases and injuries, according to WHO's first report on alcohol since 2004.

Its consumption has been linked to cirrhosis of the liver, epilepsy, poisonings, road traffic accidents, violence, and several types of cancer, including cancers of the colorectum, breast, larynx and liver.

"Six or seven years ago we didn't have strong evidence of a causal relationship between drinking and breast cancer. Now we do," Vladimir Poznyak, head of WHO's substance abuse unit who coordinated the report, told Reuters.

Alcohol consumption rates vary greatly, from high levels in developed countries, to the lowest in North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and southern Asia, whose large Muslim populations often abstain from drinking.

Homemade or illegally produced alcohol -- falling outside governmental controls and tax nets -- accounts for nearly 30 percent of total worldwide adult consumption. Some is toxic.

In France and other European countries with high levels of adult per capita consumption, heavy episodic drinking is rather low, suggesting more regular but moderate drinking patterns.

Light to moderate drinking can have a beneficial impact on heart disease and stroke, according to the WHO. "However, the beneficial cardio-protective effect of drinking disappears with heavy drinking occasions," it said.

One of the most effective ways to curb drinking, especially among young people, is to raise taxes, the report said. Setting age limits for buying and consuming alcohol, and regulating alcohol levels in drivers, also reduce abuse if enforced.

Some countries restrict marketing of alcoholic beverages or on the industry's sponsorship of sporting events.

"Yet not enough countries use these and other effective policy options to prevent death, disease and injury attributable to alcohol consumption," the WHO said.

Alcohol producers including Diageo and Anheuser Busch InBev have said they recognize the importance of industry self-regulation to address alcohol abuse and promote curbs on drunk drinking and illegal underage drinking.

But the brewer SABMiller has warned that policy measures like minimum pricing and high excise taxes on alcohol could cause more public health harm than good by leading more people to drink homemade or illegally produced alcohol.

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