



## **Alcohol consumption**

Alcohol consumption is a major public health issue and is responsible for millions of deaths and cases of disease worldwide. Alcoholic beverages contain ethanol, a psychoactive and toxic substance with the potential to cause dependence. Although alcohol has been used across cultures for centuries, scientific evidence clearly shows that its consumption is associated with substantial health and social risks.

### **Global impact of alcohol consumption**

The global impact of alcohol consumption is substantial. According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 2.6 million deaths worldwide each year are attributable to alcohol consumption. Around 1.6 million of these deaths result from noncommunicable diseases, 700,000 from injuries, and 300,000 from communicable diseases. Alcohol-attributable mortality is significantly higher among men, accounting for about 2 million deaths, compared to 600,000 deaths among women.

The highest rates of alcohol-related deaths per 100,000 people are observed in the European and African regions. Alcohol consumption disproportionately affects young adults aged 20 to 39, who account for the highest share of alcohol-attributable deaths (13%).

Globally, the number of alcohol-attributable deaths declined by 20,2 % between 2010 and 2019. However, alcohol-related harm remains widespread. It is estimated that 400 million people worldwide – around 7% of the global population aged 15 years and older - live with alcohol use disorders. Of these, approximately 209 million people (3.7 % of the world's adult population) are affected by alcohol dependence.

### **Public policies, prevention, and treatment**

Effective alcohol control measures are not applied widely enough. There has been a steady increase in the number of countries implementing national alcohol policies. While nearly all countries levy excise taxes on alcohol, many report ongoing interference from the alcohol industry during policy development. At the same time, it is important for the public to understand the risks associated with alcohol consumption and take individual measures to protect themselves from its harmful effects.

According to 2019 data, approximately 54% of the 145 reporting countries had national guidelines or standards for specialized treatment services for alcohol use disorders. However, only 46% had regulations in place to protect confidentiality for people receiving treatment.

Access to screening, brief interventions, and treatment for individuals who drink hazardously or have alcohol use disorders remains very limited. Access to medications for alcohol use disorders is also low. Overall, the proportion of people with alcohol use disorders who are in contact with treatment services ranges from less than 1% to no more than 14% in countries for which data is available.

## Health risks associated with moderate alcohol consumption

Definitions of moderate drinking vary across cultures and organizations. In general, moderate consumption is commonly defined as up to one standard drink per day for women and up to two for men. However, even moderate alcohol intake can increase the risk of certain health problems, and the level of risk rises with higher consumption.

It is important to understand that even moderate alcohol consumption carries risks, even if the majority of alcohol related harm results from heavy drinking, whether episodic (such as binge drinking) or chronic.

## Health risks from alcohol consumption

Alcohol consumption is associated with a wide range of serious health risks affecting individuals and society as a whole.

- **Cancer and cardiovascular disease**

Alcohol is a proven carcinogen, and its consumption increases the risk of several types of cancer, including breast, liver, head and neck, esophageal, and colorectal cancers. In 2019, alcohol consumption was responsible for an estimated 4.4% of all cancer diagnoses worldwide and approximately 401,000 cancer-related deaths. In 2019, alcohol consumption was estimated to have caused around 474,000 deaths from cardiovascular diseases.

- **Noncommunicable, digestive, and mental health conditions**

Alcohol consumption is associated with an increased risk of noncommunicable diseases, including liver disease, cardiovascular disease, and various types of cancer, as well as mental and behavioral disorders such as depression, anxiety, and alcohol use disorders. It negatively affects multiple body systems. It can damage the digestive system and contribute to conditions such as pancreatitis. Overall, alcohol consumption has been linked to more than 200 diseases, injuries, and other health disorders.

- **Injuries and harm to others**


Alcohol causes significant harm not only to people who drink but also to others. A substantial share of alcohol attributable harm results from injuries, particularly those caused by traffic accidents. In 2019, of 298,000 alcohol-related traffic deaths recorded worldwide, approximately 156,000 were caused by another person's drinking. Other intentional and unintentional injuries linked to alcohol consumption include falls, drownings, burns, sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and suicide.

- **Infectious diseases**

Alcohol consumption has a causal relationship with both the incidence and outcomes of infectious diseases, including tuberculosis and HIV, further increasing its public health impact.

- **Alcohol consumption during pregnancy**

Alcohol consumption during pregnancy increases the risk of giving birth to a child with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), the most severe form of which is fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). These conditions are associated with lifelong developmental disabilities and physical birth defects. Alcohol use during pregnancy also raises the risk of pregnancy complications, including miscarriage, stillbirth, and preterm birth.

In addition to health effects, long-term harmful and hazardous alcohol consumption can lead to serious social consequences, including family problems, difficulties at work, financial problems, and  loss.

## Alcohol consumption patterns and risk factors

There is no level of alcohol consumption that is entirely risk-free. Even low levels of drinking can carry health risks. The degree of risk varies widely and depends on multiple factors related to both the individual and their environment.

The impact of alcohol consumption is influenced by the amount of alcohol consumed, drinking frequency, drinking patterns, and the individual health status, including age, gender, and personal characteristics. Both acute and chronic health outcomes are largely determined by the total volume of alcohol consumed over time and by drinking patterns with heavy episodic drinking posing especially high risks.

The social and environmental context in which drinking occurs plays a significant role in alcohol-related harm, particularly in relation to intoxication. Alcohol consumption affects not only the incidence of diseases, injuries, and other health disorders, but also their severity, outcomes, and progression over time. Social factors influencing alcohol consumption patterns and related harm include cultural norms, availability of alcohol, levels of economic development, as well as the strength and enforcement of alcohol control policies.

Gender differences exist in alcohol consumption as well as alcohol-related mortality and morbidity. According to WHO estimates based on global data from 2016, 52% of men were current drinkers, compared with 35% of women. Average annual per capita alcohol consumption was 8.2 liters for men and 2.2 liters for women. Overall, alcohol consumption accounted for approximately 6.7% of all deaths among men, compared with 2.4% among women.

Some individuals and population groups may be particularly vulnerable to the toxic, psychoactive, and dependence-producing effects of alcohol. Conversely, people who adopt lower-risk drinking patterns may not necessarily face a substantially increased likelihood of negative health or social consequences, although the absence of risk cannot be guaranteed.

## Recognizing problematic alcohol use

Distinguishing between “normal” and “problematic” alcohol use can be challenging. However, there are certain warning signs and patterns of behavior that should not be ignored. Common symptoms associated with alcoholism include:

- **Increased tolerance:** needing to drink larger amounts of alcohol to achieve the same effects
- **Drinking at inappropriate times or in risky situations,** such as early in the morning or before driving
- **Denial of a drinking problem,** despite concerns expressed by friends or family members
- **Drinking alone** more frequently rather than in social settings
- **Behavioral changes** including declining performance at work or school or difficulties in personal relationships
- **Memory loss or blackouts** such as periods of amnesia after drinking
- **Alcohol-related health problems,** including liver disease, memory impairment, or alcohol-related neuropathy (nerve damage)
- **Inability to reduce or stop drinking,** despite attempts to do so
- **Abstinence symptoms,** when reducing or stopping alcohol consumption, such as shaking, nausea, sweating, or anxiety
- **Preoccupation with alcohol,** including spending significant time thinking about obtaining alcohol, drinking, or recovering from its effects
- **Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities,** hobbies or responsibilities
- **Continued alcohol use despite negative consequences,** including health, personal, or legal consequences?

Experiencing several of these signs may indicate problematic alcohol use and could signal the need for further reflection or professional support.

## **Reducing or stopping alcohol consumption without professional help**

Reducing or stopping alcohol consumption can be challenging, but many people successfully make changes on their own, particularly when alcohol use is mild to moderate. The following practical steps are intended to support individuals who wish to reduce or stop drinking without professional help. They focus on creating supportive environments, building new habits, and preparing for challenges along the way.

### **1 Remove alcohol from your home and environment**

Let's be clear: keeping alcohol at home while trying to stop drinking makes success much harder. It's comparable to trying to quit smoking while keeping a packet of cigarettes within easy reach. The constant presence of alcohol increases temptation and the risk of relapses. A good first step is to remove all alcoholic beverages from your home. Simply hiding bottles in cupboards or storage areas rarely helps and often makes temptation stronger. Taking a firm and decisive approach by creating an alcohol-free environment can significantly support your efforts to change drinking habits.

### **2. Track your consumption and cravings**

A small notebook and a pen can be powerful tools. Simply writing down when and how often you think about drinking can reveal more than you might expect. By keeping a record of cravings and impulses, you can start to identify patterns and situations that trigger your urge to drink. With this awareness, you can take a more deliberate and informed approach to change – much like a detective uncovering hidden clues. Many triggers can be avoided or managed once they are recognized, and even small insights can make a meaningful difference.

### **3. Change daily routines**

This step is essential. Routines often function like mental highways – automatic and hard to break. If your day routinely ends with a glass of wine in hand while watching TV, it can help to consciously replace that habit with an alternative. Consider going for a walk, preparing a cup of tea, or picking up a book instead. At first, it may feel as though something is missing, and that reaction is completely normal. Your brain needs time to form new associations. By creating new routines and habits that do not involve alcohol, you can gradually rediscover ways to relax and enjoy yourself without drinking.

### **4. Avoid high-risk places and situations**

Reducing or stopping alcohol-use becomes much easier when you avoid situations that make drinking more likely. This does not mean withdrawing completely or cutting yourself off from friends, but it can be helpful – especially at the beginning – to stay away from environments where alcohol plays a central or unavoidable role. Giving yourself some distance from high-risk places and situations allows you to focus on building new habits and confidence without constant temptation.

### **5. Make a public commitment**

This step can feel intimidating: telling others that you are quitting alcohol. Many people worry about being seen as the “spoilsport” or fear awkward reactions. However, sharing your decision is an important part of the process. When you say out loud that you are stopping drinking, you create accountability. Friends, family members, or partners become aware of your goal, which makes it harder to slip back into old habits unnoticed. More importantly, letting others know allows them to support you – especially during challenging moments when temptation or doubts arise.

## 6. Choose satisfying non-alcoholic alternatives

The trick is to find non-alcoholic drinks that you genuinely enjoy, so you don't feel deprived. Options such as sparkling water with a splash of lemon, iced tea, or well-crafted non-alcoholic mocktails can be both satisfying and enjoyable. Having appealing alternatives makes social situations easier as well. When you go out, you can order a drink you actually like without feeling pressured to choose alcohol. This simple change can be surprisingly effective in reducing alcohol consumption.

## 7. Stay busy and engaged

An idle mind can make it harder to resist alcohol cravings. Keeping yourself occupied with meaningful or enjoyable activities – especially during times when urges are strongest – can be extremely helpful. Physical exercise, reading, learning something new, or returning to hobbies you once enjoyed are all effective ways to stay engaged. The idea is simple: the busier your schedule, the less mental space you will have to think about what you can't (or shouldn't) do. Staying active helps redirect your energy and attention toward healthier alternatives.

## 8. Reward your progress

Giving yourself a pat on the back isn't wrong. In fact, it is absolutely necessary. Every milestone you reach, whether it is a week, a month, or another goal you have set without drinking, deserves recognition. Choose rewards that don't involve alcohol, such as a massage, a shopping trip, a special meal, or a short weekend trip. Treating yourself reinforces positive behavior and helps maintain motivation over time. Celebrating your achievements reminds you how far you have come and encourages you to keep going.

## 9. Manage emotions without alcohol

Alcohol is often used as a quick escape when emotions feel overwhelming. However, learning to face difficult feelings without relying on alcohol is one of the most important steps toward long-term change. When you feel sad, anxious, or stressed, try alternative ways to process those emotions. Going for a walk, writing in a journal, listening to uplifting music, practicing relaxation techniques, or talking to someone you trust can all be effective. The key is to learn to acknowledge and sit with your emotions rather than covering them up with alcohol. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but soon you will realize that emotions are temporary. They rise and fall – and you don't need alcohol to manage or survive them.

## 10. Have a plan for possible relapses:

Relapses can happen, and being prepared for them is part of the process. While the goal is to avoid returning to old drinking patterns, it is equally important to know how to respond if a setback occurs. If you slip up, instead of punishing yourself, try analyzing what led you to drink. Was it a specific place, a social setting, stress, or emotional strain? Consider what you might do differently next time. Having a clear plan for these moments makes it easier to regain control and continue moving forward. Focus less on self-blame and more on understanding the circumstances. For example, you may realize that meeting friends without explaining that you have stopped drinking, or experiencing several stressful days in a row, made you more vulnerable. These insights are valuable because they help you identify behaviors and situations you can adjust in the future. (You don't have to make the same mistake twice).

Quitting alcohol is a process, not a one-time decision. A relapse does not mean failure; it means you are learning how to navigate life without alcohol.

## Tips for responsible drinking



- 1. Choose a designated driver:** If you plan to go out, always agree in advance on someone who will not drink. This ensures that everyone gets home safely.
- 2. Stay hydrated:** Drink water before and during alcohol consumption. Alternating alcoholic beverages with water helps prevent dehydration and may reduce the severity of hangovers.
- 3. Set limits:** Decide beforehand how many drinks you will have and stick to that limit. Planning ahead helps prevent excessive drinking.
- 4. Pace yourself:** As a general guideline, limit yourself to no more than one standard drink per hour. Drinking slowly allows your body time to process alcohol.
- 5. Eat before and while drinking:** Eating food slows down the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream and helps reduce its effects.
- 6. Choose low-alcohol drinks:** Consider beverages with lower alcohol content or even non-alcoholic alternatives. These allow you to enjoy social occasions without strong effects.
- 7. Understand what excessive drinking is:** Learn what constitutes heavy or risky drinking and how it affects your health. Being informed supports safer and more conscious choices.
- 8. Avoid mixing alcohol with medication:** Do not combine alcohol with medications, especially those that can interact with alcohol or intensify its effects.
- 9. Do not drink alcohol during pregnancy.** Alcohol consumption during pregnancy can cause serious harm to the unborn child.
- 10. Do not allow minors to drink alcohol:** Respect and follow the legal drinking age in your country or region. These laws are designed to protect the health and safety of young people.
- 11. Find alternative activities:** Choose social activities that don't involve alcohol, such as sports, games, events, to have fun without drinking.
- 12. Seek support:** If you feel that alcohol consumption is becoming a problem, do not hesitate to seek support from friends, family, or professionals.



By following these tips, you can enjoy social occasions while maintaining a responsible approach to alcohol consumption.

### Conclusions

Alcohol consumption is a complex issue shaped by cultural, social, and public health factors. It is essential for individuals to understand the associated risks and make informed decisions about their drinking habits. Effective prevention strategies and education are crucial for reducing the negative impact of alcohol on health and society.

It is vital to address the factors that influence the acceptability, availability, and affordability of alcohol through cross-sectoral, comprehensive, and integrated policy measures. Achieving universal health coverage for people living with alcohol use disorders and other alcohol-related health conditions is equally important by strengthening health system responses and ensuring access to comprehensive, high-quality treatment and care for those in need.

Public policies and interventions aimed at preventing and reducing alcohol-related harm should be guided by public health interests, clearly defined health objectives, and the best available scientific evidence.

Engaging all relevant stakeholders is essential. However, potential conflicts of interest - especially with the alcohol industry - must be carefully assessed before any collaboration is initiated. Economic operators should refrain from activities that could prevent, delay, or undermine the development, enactment, implementation, and enforcement of effective strategies to reduce harmful alcohol use.

Through coordinated action, appropriate safeguards, and a clear focus on public health priorities, it is possible to significantly reduce the health and social harms associated with alcohol.

**Small decisions make a big difference.  
Drink responsibly. Protect your health - and the health of others.**