

Alcohol-related Harm in the United States



The Problem

Globally, alcohol consumption causes an estimated 2.5 million deaths every year.¹ Alcohol has been found the most harmful drug in terms of harm to both users and to other people. A 2013 study found alcohol caused nine times as many deaths annually as other drugs.²

Alcohol contributes to a wide range of negative societal and personal consequences, and causes more harm than any other drug in the U.S.³ Despite the alcohol industry's claims, alcohol-related harm goes far beyond drunk driving or underage drinking.

In the United States:

- Alcohol is the third leading cause of preventable death.^{4, 5}
- Nine percent of all deaths were attributed to alcohol consumption in 2005.⁶
- Approximately 4,300 people under the legal drinking age of 21 die annually from injuries caused by drinking alcohol. Alcohol consumption accounts for approximately 88,000 deaths each year.⁸
- Alcohol use is associated with physical and sexual assault, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, violence, vandalism, crime, overdose, other substance use, and high-risk behavior.^{4, 7, 9, 10}
- Alcohol contributes to various illnesses such as hypertension, liver cirrhosis, chronic pancreatitis and cancers of the breast, esophagus, larynx, pancreas and liver.^{11, 12}
- Alcohol contributes to a wide range of injuries, including motor vehicle crashes, fires, falls, drownings, and unintentional firearm injuries,¹³ even among moderate drinkers.^{14, 15}
- Alcohol plays a role in violent crimes such as homicide, sexual assaults, domestic violence, and child abuse.¹³ Consuming more alcohol is associated with higher odds of engaging in criminal activity and being the victim of a predatory crime.¹²
- Alcohol contributes to maternal and perinatal conditions such as low birth weight, cognitive deficiencies, and fetal alcohol disorders.^{11, 16}
- Alcohol plays a significant role in the top four leading causes of death for youth aged 10-24: motor vehicle crashes (26%), other unintentional injuries (17%), homicide (16%), and suicide (13%).¹⁷
- As many as one in three elderly adults who continue to consume alcohol into older adulthood are at risk of harm in the context of co-morbidities (21.5%), specific medication use (21.2%), or alcohol use alone (22.3%).¹⁸
- In 2005 alone, there were more than 1.6 million hospitalizations and 4 million emergency room visits for alcohol-related conditions.¹⁹
- An estimated 21% of all hospitalized injuries and 36% of all hospitalizations resulting from an assault are alcohol related.¹⁴
- The economic costs of alcohol are estimated to have been \$223 billion in 2006 – more than 1.5% of total GDP, and far exceeding costs of the other leading preventable causes of death in the U.S.^{19, 20, 21}

- The healthcare costs from alcohol-related problems amount to more than \$24 billion annually, with government paying over 60% of this cost.¹⁹

Bottom Line

Far from a benign substance, alcohol use, even at moderate levels, can cause a wide variety of harm, the scope of which goes largely unrecognized by the general public and policymakers alike.

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