Alcohol and Cancer Risk

The Problem

Cancer is the leading cause of death in economically developed countries and the second leading cause in economically developing countries.\textsuperscript{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 deaths\textsuperscript{3} and nearly 4\% of all U.S. cancer deaths.\textsuperscript{4} There is no determined safe threshold for alcohol consumption and cancer risk.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{9}
- Seven types of cancer are significantly associated with alcohol consumption:\textsuperscript{4}
  - Cancer of the oral cavity
  - Esophagus
  - Liver
  - Pharynx
  - Colorectum
  - Female breast
  - Larynx
- 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.\textsuperscript{10}
- Head and neck cancers account for the majority of alcohol related cancers among men.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{2-4, 11}
- Light and moderate drinking is associated with greater cancer risk for some cancers when compared to non-drinkers.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{4}
- Alcohol-attributable cancers resulted in an average of 17-19 years of potential life lost per death.\textsuperscript{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.


