

Study shows alcohol consumption is a leading preventable cause of cancer death in the US

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Researchers from the Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) and Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) have shown that alcohol is a major contributor to cancer deaths and years of potential life lost. These findings, published in the April 2013 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, also show that reducing alcohol consumption is an important cancer prevention strategy as alcohol is a known carcinogen even when consumed in small quantities.

Previous studies consistently have shown that alcohol consumption is a significant risk factor for cancers of the mouth, throat, esophagus and liver. More recent research has shown that alcohol also increases the risk of cancers of the colon, rectum and female breast. While estimates have shown that alcohol accounts for about four percent of all [cancer](#)-related deaths worldwide, there is a lack of literature focusing on cancer-related deaths in the U.S.

Timothy Naimi, MD, MPH, from the Department of Medicine at BUSM and colleagues from the National Cancer Institute, the Alcohol Research Group, Public Health Institute and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, examined recent data from the U.S. on alcohol consumption and cancer mortality. They found that alcohol resulted in approximately 20,000 cancer deaths annually, accounting for about 3.5 percent of all cancer deaths in the U.S.

Breast cancer was the most common cause of alcohol-attributable cancer deaths in women, accounting for approximately 6,000 deaths annually, or about 15 percent of all [breast cancer](#) deaths. Cancers of the mouth, throat and esophagus were common causes of alcohol-attributable [cancer mortality](#) in men, resulting in a total of about 6,000 annual deaths.

The researchers also found that each alcohol-related cancer death accounted for an average of 18 years of potential life lost. In addition, although higher levels of [alcohol consumption](#) led to a higher [cancer risk](#), average consumption of 1.5 drinks per day or less accounted for 30 percent of all alcohol-attributable cancer deaths.

"The relationship between alcohol and cancer is strong, but is not widely appreciated by the public and remains underemphasized even by physicians," said Naimi, who served as the paper's senior author. "Alcohol is a big preventable cancer risk factor that has been hiding in plain sight."

Provided by Boston University Medical Center

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