

Nine out of 10 people don't link alcohol and cancer

1 April 2016

Almost 90 per cent of people in England don't associate drinking alcohol with an increased risk of cancer, according to a new report published today (Friday 1 April 2016).

The study, commissioned by Cancer Research UK and led by researchers from the University of Sheffield, found that just 13 per cent of adults mentioned [cancer](#) when asked "which, if any, health conditions can result from [drinking](#) too much [alcohol](#)?"

Drinking alcohol is linked to an increased risk of seven different cancers - liver, breast, bowel, mouth, throat, oesophageal (food pipe), laryngeal (voice box) but the survey highlighted a lack of understanding of the link between [drinking alcohol](#) and certain types of the disease.

When prompted by asking about seven different cancer types, 80 per cent said they thought alcohol caused [liver cancer](#) but only 18 per cent were aware of the link with [breast cancer](#). In contrast alcohol causes 3,200 breast cancer cases each year compared to 400 cases of liver cancer.

The report, produced by researchers at the University's School of Health and Related Research (SchARR), comes ahead of the consultation closing on how well new drinking guidelines proposed by the UK's Chief Medical Officers in January 2016, are communicated.

These drew attention to the link between alcohol and cancer, and highlighted the need for greater public awareness of this risk.

The findings are based on a nationally representative online survey of 2,100 people conducted in July 2015.

The study also showed that only one in five people could correctly identify the previous recommended maximum number of units that should not be

exceeded in a day, as recommended at that time in 2015.

Among drinkers, as few as one in 10 men (10.8 per cent) and one in seven women (15.2 per cent) correctly identified these recommended limits and used them to track their drinking habits.

Dr Penny Buykx, a senior research fellow at The University of Sheffield and lead-author of the report, said: "We've shown that public awareness of the increased cancer risk from drinking alcohol remains worryingly low.

"People link drinking and liver cancer, but most still don't realise that cancers including breast cancer, mouth and throat cancers and bowel cancer are also linked with alcohol, and that risks for some cancers go up even by drinking a small amount."

Alison Cox, Cancer Research UK's director of cancer prevention, said: "The link between alcohol and cancer is now well established, and it's not just heavy drinkers who are at risk. This is reflected in the new guidelines issued by the UK's Chief Medical Officers that stated that the risk of developing a range of illnesses, including cancer, increased with any amount of alcohol you drink.

"As the consultation closes on how clear and understandable the new guidelines are, it's concerning that so few people know that alcohol increases the risk of seven types of cancer. If the new guidelines are to make a difference and change drinking habits in the UK national health campaigns are needed to provide clear information about the health risks of drinking alcohol."

Sir Ian Gilmore, Chair of the Alcohol Health Alliance, said: "The lack of public awareness of the link between alcohol consumption and cancer is extremely concerning. Up-to-date research demonstrates the clear link between alcohol and seven types of cancer, and it is not just heavy

drinkers who are at risk – any amount increases the risk.

"The Chief Medical Officers have been clear in their new alcohol guideline that there is no level of drinking which can be considered 'safe' from these risks. As the CMOs emphasise, the public have a right to know about the link between alcohol and cancer and other health risks, so that they can make an informed choice about their drinking habits. The Chief Medical Officers are also clear in stating that the government has a responsibility to ensure this information is provided for citizens.

"Consumers have the right to know the health risks of the products they purchase and consume. The Alcohol Health Alliance is calling for [health](#) warnings on product labels, along with mass media information campaigns, both strongly supported by the public, to empower informed choice about drinking."

More information: The new alcohol guidelines can be found here:

www.gov.uk/government/consultations/alcohol-new-guidelines

Provided by University of Sheffield

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