Most Americans Still Unaware that Alcohol Is a Cause of Cancer

A new study emphasized the need to increase awareness that alcohol can cause cancer.

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Most American adults remain unaware that alcohol is a cause of tens of thousands of cancer cases in the U.S. every year; a new study shows that those who are aware of the risks are far more likely to support warning labels and other policies that could highlight the link. This latest study supports previous research by the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) and emphasizes the critical need to increase awareness of the alcohol-cancer link.

Alcohol is the strongest modifiable risk factor for cancer after tobacco use and excess body weight. AICR's research shows that alcohol increases the risk of at least six cancers, including colorectal, breast, esophageal, liver, stomach and oral cancers.

"This paper confirms AICR's own surveys showing that over 50 percent of the U.S. population are unaware that alcohol causes cancer. This study goes further to show that being aware of the risks is linked to support for advertising restrictions, health warnings and drinking guidelines on containers," said Nigel Brockton, PhD, Vice President of Research at AICR. "Alcohol is a known carcinogen and it's important that people know the risks so they can make informed decisions."

Awareness of alcohol-cancer link low

In this new study, awareness of the alcohol−cancer link was low, with less than a third of adults aware that alcohol increases risk. Researchers used data from a nationally representative survey of close to 3,900 U.S. adults who were surveyed by mail. When asked about specific alcoholic beverages, only 20 percent of respondents were aware that wine increases cancer risk; 25 percent said that beer does and 31% associated cancer risk with liquor consumption. Research shows that any type of alcohol intake increases cancer risk, whether it is from wine, beer or liquor.

AICR's latest Cancer Risk Awareness Survey also found that almost half of Americans are unaware of the alcohol–cancer link.

When examining communication-focused alcohol policies, the new study found that nearly two-thirds of adults supported adding health warning labels to alcohol packaging and recommended drinking guidelines.

The labels were not specifically related to cancer but people who were aware of the alcohol-cancer link were more likely to support warning labels and guidelines compared to those who were unaware of the link. For example, 75 percent of Americans who were aware that alcohol increases cancer risk supported adding health warnings to the label compared to 56 percent among those unaware of the link.

AICR supports adding a label to alcoholic beverages to inform consumers of the strong link between alcohol and cancer. AICR has joined other public health groups in sending a citizen's petition to the Treasury Department's Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB) and a letter to the Surgeon General asking that they work with Congress to initiate this process. AICR also supports adding a "Serving Facts" label to alcoholic beverages, similar to the Nutrition Facts label on non-alcoholic beverages, to inform consumers of basic information, such as alcohol content, calories, serving size, and number of servings per container.

Wine, beer and liquor can all increase risk

All types of alcohol, including wine, beer and liquor, increase cancer risk. For some cancers, such as breast and esophageal, the risk starts increasing with less than one drink per day. Overall, the greater the alcohol consumption, the greater the cancer risk.

Laboratory studies provide insights into how alcohol can spur cancer development. "Alcohol is converted to acetaldehyde that can directly attack DNA and interfere with important micronutrients like folate. Alcohol also adds 'empty calories' that may contribute to weight gain, overweight or obesity, another strong cancer risk factor," says Brockton.

For cancer prevention, AICR recommends to not drink alcohol. If you do drink, AICR recommends limiting consumption to no more than two drinks a day for men and one drink a day for women, consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Any reduction in alcohol lowers cancer risk

Slightly more than half of Americans report drinking at some point in the previous month, according to a recent national survey that used 2019 data. Sales of hard liquor and wine increased during the early days of the pandemic. A concerning trend is an increase in binge and high-intensity drinking. The survey found that a quarter of American adults reported binge drinking at least once in the previous month. Binge drinking typically occurs after a woman consumes four or more drinks or a man five or more in about two hours; high-intensity drinking is double that of binge drinking.

"Communicating the strong link between alcohol consumption and increased cancer risk is a major first step—it's all about awareness," notes Sheena Patel, MS, RDN, AICR Director of Nutrition Programs. "For those who want to lower their alcohol intake there are several strategies that can help them cut back, including alternating alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks (e.g., mocktails, nonalcoholic beers and flavored sparkling waters), ordering smaller sizes or keeping a few days a week alcohol free. Any reduction in alcohol consumption can help to lower your risk.

“Alcohol intake is one of the many modifiable factors that people can change—along with being a healthy weight, moving more and eating a mostly plant-based diet to lower cancer risk. These actions all can have a powerful effect—especially when done together.”

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