



Position statement: alcohol

The problem

Alcohol's role in causing cancer is less well known than its effects in causing liver disease and life-disrupting addiction. However, the link is clear: alcohol is known to be a factor in causing seven cancers, and the effect occurs however the alcohol is consumed – whether in wine, beer or spirits.¹ As a secondary effect, alcoholic drinks can often be surprisingly calorific, and increase a person's cancer risk by causing obesity.

There has been a considerable increase in alcoholic consumption in recent years as the result of greater affordability and relaxation in licensing laws.² Changing patterns of retail, including increases in off-licence outlets with supermarkets and similar retail outlets promoting sales of alcohol, have also contributed.

As a result, acute illness and deaths from alcohol have increased, especially during pandemic lockdowns.³

Recommendations

Unlike with tobacco, we do not want to see alcohol wholly removed from its place in our society. But a healthier relationship with it is highly desirable.

In the UK, the devolved nations are generally leading the way on alcohol policy, while England is lagging behind and tends not to approach alcohol use as a population health issue.⁴

Scotland and Wales have introduced minimum unit pricing (Northern Ireland consulted on it in 2022, with next steps still awaited), which has proved successful in restricting the availability of cheap high-strength alcohol.

In England, there has been no new strategy on alcohol harm since 2012, when a bold strategy was published that promised minimum unit pricing, banning multi-buy alcohol promotions in shops, obliging local authorities to consider public health when making alcohol licensing decisions, and other population-level interventions. We would like to see this approach revived and delivered.

We are pleased that alcohol duties are now linked to inflation; they should additionally be set with greater reference to the health effects of alcohol. Labelling is another area where stronger action could be taken: requirements for clearer and more extensive information about the harmful effects of alcohol should be introduced; the UK's uncoupling from EU rules in this area gives it considerable freedom to act.



Although legislation and regulation are essential, there will always be a place for measures to equip individuals to make their own decisions, such as, for example, through their responses to better labelling. But as with all approaches that put the onus on individual responsibility, this can only be part of the policy mix, and will not achieve decisive change on its own.

About CancerWatch

CancerWatch is an organisation made up of people whose lives have been affected by cancer, who are passionate about eliminating preventable cancers in the future.

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¹ <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/alcohol-and-cancer>

² <https://www.ias.org.uk/factsheet/price/>

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7768217/>

⁴ <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/four-nations-how-evidence-based-are-alcohol-policies-and-programmes-across-the-uk/>