

Key Messages on Alcohol Harms and Policy Solutions



Burden & Imperative

- Globally, alcohol consumption contributes to approximately 2.6 million deaths each year.
- Alcohol is the leading risk factor globally for premature death and disability for people between the ages of 15 and 49.
- Young people who start using alcohol before the age of 15 years are six times more likely to develop alcohol dependence later in life than those who begin after age 21.
- Alcohol plays a significant role in violent incidents, including homicide, car crashes, falls, suicide, child abuse, and violence against women.
- Alcohol is carcinogenic and can be toxic and addictive. Alcohol consumption causes liver disease, heart disease and seven types of cancer – mouth, throat, esophagus, breast, liver, colon and rectal.
- Despite clear evidence of the harm alcohol causes, this public health threat has not been adequately acknowledged or addressed and remains a low priority among countries globally.

Economics

- The economic costs of alcohol dwarf any positive economic contribution of the alcohol trade by increasing health care costs, reducing productivity in the workplace, jeopardizing healthcare and welfare systems, and reducing the gross domestic product (GDP).
- For every dollar invested in reducing alcohol harms through the three most effective alcohol policies (taxation, availability and marketing), the return on investment is more than ninefold.

Knowledge & Awareness

- Alcohol harms are not only from heavy alcohol use but any consumption that places users or others at risk of acute or chronic illness, injury or violence.
- All alcohol is harmful. No one type of alcohol is “safer” or healthier. The harm is related to the volume of alcohol consumed.

Reducing Alcohol Harm Through Policy

- The best way to minimize the social and health harms from alcohol is to lower consumption overall.
- The death, disability and injury burdens caused by alcohol are largely preventable through effective, evidence-based, population-wide measures.
- The three “best buy” alcohol policies are taxation, marketing restrictions, and regulation of availability.
 - Alcohol taxation that raises the cost of alcohol is win-win-win. It reduces affordability of alcohol and ultimately reduces alcohol consumption, delays the onset of use and encourages quitting or cutting back, and it generates government revenue that can be reinvested back into health and social issues.
 - Enforcing existing regulations on the availability of alcohol, such as establishing a minimum purchasing age and restricting hours of sale, can reduce the overall level of alcohol harms.
 - Alcohol marketing restrictions protect everyone, including youth, women, and people with alcohol dependence. These restrictions help reset the commercial environment that normalizes alcohol consumption while ignoring its harms.
- Alcohol labelling, such as warning labels on products, can be effective in improving people’s comprehension of the health risks involved in consuming alcohol.

The Alcohol Industry

- The alcohol industry has the financial and political power to block and derail sound alcohol policies that threaten its profits.
- The alcohol industry often misleadingly frames solutions around the need for better individual behavior and “responsibility” rather than evidence-based strategies and policies.
- Across the world the alcohol industry uses aggressive marketing tactics that encourage harmful alcohol consumption.
- Voluntary self-regulation of alcohol marketing is not a substitute for legal regulation but is often used by the alcohol industry to distract from the implementation of effective policy measures.
- The alcohol industry uses a roster of tactics to stop or delay effective policies similar to those used by tobacco companies.

