

Low public awareness of link between cancer and alcohol

There is low public awareness in England of the link between alcohol consumption and cancer, according to a report commissioned by Cancer Research UK. The researchers conducted an online survey in 2015 of 2100 people, weighted to be representative of the general public. The study was done before the UK alcohol guidelines were adjusted earlier in 2016, when the recommended weekly limit for men was reduced from 21 units per week to 14, bringing it in line with recommendations for women.

"It was an interesting time to do the study", explains lead author Penny Buykx (University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK). "The previous guidelines had been in place for almost two decades—the low level of awareness was really quite shocking". 13% of those surveyed mentioned

cancer when asked "which, if any, health conditions can result from drinking too much alcohol?" Even after participants were shown a list of illnesses that included cancer, less than half connected the disease with alcohol. "It suggests that with the release of the new guidelines, there is plenty of room for wider dissemination of public health information", Buykx said.

80% of respondents answered that they thought liver cancer is caused by alcohol, but this may be down to widespread awareness of the association between alcohol and liver damage (95% of respondents knew that alcohol causes liver disease). Only 18% of respondents associated breast cancer with alcohol. People who had previously been diagnosed with cancer gave similar answers to the rest of the cohort. 11% of

surveyed male drinkers and 15% of surveyed female drinkers knew the current guidelines on alcohol and used this knowledge to monitor their intake.

"The research has highlighted that most of the public are not aware of the link between alcohol and cancer, or that your risk increases after the first drink", pointed out Jackie Ballard (Alcohol Concern, London, UK). She advocates mandatory warnings on alcohol products. "We also need a mass media campaign to make sure the new guidelines are widely understood", Ballard added. The public may well be receptive to such measures. The participants in Buykx's study offered little opposition to the idea of health information labels or health warnings related to alcohol.

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For more on the **study by Cancer Research UK** see http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/sites/default/files/an_investigation_of_public_knowledge_of_the_link_between_alcohol_and_cancer_buykx_et_al.pdf