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The Regional Municipality of Durham Information Report

From: Commissioner & Medical Officer of Health
Report: #2025-INFO-03
Date: January 17, 2025

Subject:

Alcohol and Cancer Risk 2025

Recommendation:

Receive for information

Report:

1. Purpose

1.1 To provide an update on the report entitled [Alcohol and Cancer Risk 2025](#), released by the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (the Advisory) on January 3, 2025.

2. Background

- 2.1 The [2020-2025 U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) established national recommendations around alcohol consumption. According to the guidelines, there are some people who should not drink alcohol at all (e.g., people who do not already drink, pregnant people, those younger than the legal drinking age, people with certain medical conditions, and people recovering from addiction).
- 2.2 For those that do decide to consume alcohol, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend limiting alcohol consumption to two drinks daily for men and one drink daily for women. The guidelines also recognized that alcohol was found to increase cancer risks even with low levels of alcohol consumption (i.e., less than one drink in a day), so the guidelines recommended caution with any amount.
- 2.3 The purpose of the U.S. Dietary Guidelines was to move Americans toward a healthy dietary pattern and minimize the risks associated with consuming alcohol. Since then, the body of scientific evidence about the causal link between alcohol consumption and cancer (even in small amounts) has grown, so many health experts and organizations, like the U.S. Surgeon General Advisory, have responded

with stricter personal consumption recommendations and more action from governments.

3. The Advisory's Key Findings

3.1 In its report, the Advisory summarizes the scientific evidence on the causal relationship between alcohol consumption and increased cancer risks.

- a. Alcohol consumption is the third leading preventable cause of cancer in the U.S., after tobacco and obesity.
- b. Alcohol use is contributing to nearly 100,000 cancer cases and about 20,000 cancer deaths in the U.S. each year.
- c. Alcohol consumption is causally linked to at least seven types of cancer including: breast, colorectum, esophagus, liver, mouth (oral cavity), throat (pharynx), and voice box (larynx).
- d. Alcohol-related cancer deaths shorten the lives of those who die by an average of 15 years.
- e. The amount of alcohol a person drinks affects their risk of cancer. An important factor is the overall amount of alcohol consumed consistently over time. The risk of cancer increases as the level of consumption increases, with higher risk at higher levels of consumption. For certain cancers, like breast, mouth, and throat cancers, evidence shows that this risk may start to increase around one or fewer drinks per day.
- f. In a 2019 survey, nearly three quarters (72 per cent) of U.S. adults reported they consumed one or more drinks per week, but only 45 per cent were aware of the relationship between alcohol and cancer risks.

4. The Advisory's Recommended Actions

4.1 The Advisory shared the following six actions to reduce alcohol-related cancers in the U.S.:

- a. Update the existing Surgeon General's health warning label on alcohol-containing beverages to include a warning about the risk of cancer associated with alcohol consumption. This should also include making the label more visible and effective at increasing awareness of the risks.
- b. Reassess recommended limits for alcohol consumption to account for the latest evidence on alcohol consumption and cancer risk.
- c. Strengthen and expand education efforts to increase general awareness that alcohol consumption causes cancer.

- d. Highlight alcohol consumption as a leading modifiable cancer risk factor and incorporate proven alcohol reduction strategies into population-level cancer prevention initiatives and plans.
- e. For healthcare providers, inform patients about the link between alcohol and increased cancer risk.
- f. For individuals, be aware of the relationship between alcohol consumption and increased cancer risk when considering whether or how much to drink.

5. Local Program Initiatives

- 5.1 Durham Region Health Department (DRHD) promotes [Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health](#) which provides evidence-based advice to help people make informed decisions about their alcohol consumption. The guidance outlines a continuum of risk associated with weekly alcohol use, in which two standard drinks or less per week will likely avoid alcohol-related consequences, while three to six drinks per week increase a person's risk of developing several types of cancer, including breast and colon cancer. Canada's guidance notes that each additional standard drink increases the risk of alcohol-related consequences.
- 5.2 DRHD launched an awareness campaign in fall 2024, to help promote Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health and amplify key messages from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. The campaign entitled Drink Less, Live More encourages local residents to reflect on their alcohol use. Campaign materials refer residents to durham.ca/alcohol for information on the health and social risks associated with alcohol use as well as strategies to reduce personal use. The campaign was promoted across Durham Region at train stations, in transit shelters and buses, at recreation centres, malls and movie theatres as well as various outdoor billboards.
- 5.3 DRHD provides health information about the risks associated with alcohol use, recommendations for reducing usage and community resources and services for individuals looking for help, available at durham.ca/alcohol.
- 5.4 DRHD engages youth and young adults to provide age-appropriate health information, prevention and harm reduction strategies and local treatment service options, in collaboration with local schools and post secondary institutions.
- 5.5 DRHD provides support to parents to help prevent substance use during the teen years and to build and maintain strong parent/child connections.
- 5.6 DRHD provides mental health resources and supports, including information on crises, available at durham.ca.
- 5.7 Local health statistics and information on cancer and alcohol can be found on the [Durham Health Stats](#) webpage, which includes:

- a. [The Durham Region Cancer Data Tracker](#)
- b. [Young Adults in Durham Region: Healthy living behaviours of young adults ages 18 to 24 in Durham Region \(September 2024\)](#)
- c. [Awareness of the Risks of Using Alcohol and Cannabis \(November 2018\)](#)
- d. [Alcohol Use Among Durham Region Students Grades 9-12](#)
- e. [Trends In: Early substance use – alcohol \(December 2017\)](#)
- f. [Trends In: Past year alcohol use \(December 2017\)](#)
- g. [Quick Facts: Percentage of secondary school students reporting substance use before Grade 9, 2016-2017\)](#)

5.8 DRHD offers consultation and support to municipalities that are interested in taking action to restrict alcohol retail density and/or restrict alcohol licence approvals in a particular geographic area.

6. Previous Reports

- 6.1 Report [2023-INFO-83](#) provided an update on the report: [Characteristics of Substance-Related Toxicity Deaths in Ontario: Stimulant, Opioid, Benzodiazepine, and Alcohol-Related Deaths](#).
- 6.2 Report [2024-INFO-16](#) provided an update on the report: [Prescribing Patterns, Substance Use Disorder Diagnoses, and Access to Treatment Prior to Substance-Related Toxicity Deaths in Ontario](#).
- 6.3 Report [2024-INFO-60](#) provided an update on the report on the Policy Position Statement entitled: [Alcohol and Cancer Risk](#) by the World Cancer Research Fund International.

7. Relationship to Strategic Plan

- 7.1 This report aligns with the following strategic goal and priorities in the 2020-2024 Durham Region Strategic Plan:
 - a. Goal 2: Community Vitality
 - 2.3: Enhance community safety and well-being
 - 2.4: Influence the social determinants of health to improve outcomes for vulnerable populations

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 Globally, 741,300 cancer cases were related to alcohol consumption in 2020; 185,100 of those cases were related to consumption of approximately two drinks daily or fewer.
- 8.2 Despite clear evidence demonstrating the effect of alcohol consumption on cancer risk, there is a large gap in public understanding of the risk.
- 8.3 While the causal relationship between alcohol consumption and cancer is firmly established, further research is needed on:
 - a. The potential effect of alcohol consumption on increasing the risk of additional types of cancer.
 - b. How specific drinking patterns (e.g., binge drinking) may affect cancer risk.
 - c. How drinking at specific ages and during certain developmental periods, such as in adolescence and older adulthood, may influence the risk of cancer.
- 8.4 Implementing evidence-based alcohol control policies, like updating health warning labels on alcohol products, is an effective way to increase public awareness of harms, reduce alcohol consumption, and decrease the negative health, social and economic impacts of alcohol.

Respectfully submitted,

Original signed by

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