

Alcohol consumption in Europe decreasing but still the highest in the world

People in the WHO European Region drink almost twice the world average amount of alcohol, the latest WHO figures show. According to a new report, *Global status report on alcohol and health 2014*,¹ consumption in Europe fell by 10%, from 12.2 L pure alcohol per capita in 2003–2005 to 10.9 L in 2008–2010. Nevertheless, Europe still has the highest alcohol consumption in the world. In response, some Member States are implementing effective policy measures identified by WHO, such as restricting access to retailed alcohol, raising taxes on alcohol and enforcing bans on alcohol advertising.

“Policy developments are starting to show a positive impact, but, although there are signs that consumption is on the decline, alcohol is still a major contributor to death and disease and goes hand in hand with the big killers: cancer, cardiovascular diseases and obesity. We know which alcohol policies are effective, and countries can do much more to adopt and implement measures that work,” said Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

How alcohol is consumed can be as important as the quantity consumed. Binge drinking, defined as drinking at least 60 g alcohol on one drinking occasion, is especially dangerous to health. According to the new global report, on average, 31.8% of male drinkers and 12.6% of female drinkers in the WHO European Region binged on alcohol during the previous month.

Trend towards stricter alcohol policies

The latest data from the WHO Regional Office for Europe show that increasing numbers of Member States are implementing evidence-based policies that affect consumption. The following changes have occurred since 2010.

Policy changes

- The number of Member States with a minimum age limit of 18 years for sales of alcoholic beverages increased from 31 to 43.
- The number of Member States with legally binding regulations on alcohol advertising increased from 42 to 47.

¹ Global status report on alcohol and health 2014. Geneva: World Health organization; 2014 (http://www.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/112736/1/9789240692763_engpdf, accessed 12 May 2014).

- The number of Member States with legally binding restrictions on alcohol product placement increased from 31 to 36.
- The number of Member States in which the level of taxation for alcoholic beverages is adjusted for inflation increased from 7 to 13.
- The number of Member States with a limit for blood alcohol concentration of 0.5 g/L or less for drivers in the general population increased from 42 to 51, and the number using random breath-testing rose from 27 to 46.

European alcohol consumption in figures

- Alcohol consumption in the Region is 4.7 L higher than the world average.
- Annual consumption of pure alcohol per person in the WHO European Region is 10.9 L.
- Consumption declined from 12.2 L pure alcohol per capita in 2003–2005 to 10.9 L in 2008–2010.
- The proportion of current drinkers in the Region's total population decreased from 68.8% in 2003–2005 to 66.4% in 2008–2010.

The WHO Regional Office for Europe has published a new report, the European status report on alcohol and health 2014;² its 10 separate chapters describe these and other policy developments in the WHO European Region. The Regional Office also offers a tool that people can use to test their level of drinking.³

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² The European status report on alcohol and health 2014 [website]. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2014 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/disease-prevention/alcohol-use/news/news/2014/03/european-status-report-on-alcohol-and-health-2014>, accessed 12 May 2014).

³ Do you drink too much? Test your own alcohol consumption with the AUDIT test [website]. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2014 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/disease-prevention/alcohol-use/do-you-drink-too-much-test-your-own-alcohol-consumption-with-the-audit-test>, accessed 12 May 2014).