Alcohol consumption and cancer risk

A recent landmark report described alcohol consumption as a convincing cause of cancers of the mouth, pharynx, larynx, esophagus, female breast, and male colorectal cancer, and a probable cause of liver cancer, and female colorectal cancer.

Alcohol consumption caused an estimated 6,160 new cases of these alcohol-related cancers between 2000 and 2004 in Ontario, representing 7.3% of these cancers.

If the proportion of people consuming alcohol in Ontario were to be reduced by half, an estimated 3.5% of alcohol-related cancers could be eliminated each year, translating into approximately 3,000 less cases over a 5-year period.

Research has suggested that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption to prevent an increased risk of cancer; however, because of the potential benefits of alcohol consumption on coronary heart disease, recommendations for cancer prevention include limiting alcohol intake to no more than 1 drink per day for women and no more than 2 drinks per day for men.

Increased risk exists regardless of the type of alcoholic beverage consumed. The following drinks all have the same amount of alcohol and count as one drink each: 1 regular beer, 5 ounces of wine, 1 wine cooler, 1 ½ ounces of liquor, liqueur, or brandy. Individuals who drink alcohol should not smoke tobacco, as these exposures work together to greatly increase the risk of developing some of the alcohol-related cancers.

Per capita alcohol sales decreased from a peak of 11 litres of alcohol per Ontarian aged 15+ around 1980, to a low of 7 litres in the mid 1990s. Since then per capita sales have been increasing, with 2005 levels reported at 8 litres of alcohol per Ontarian (Statistics Canada annual reports).


For more information, talk to your health care provider or call Cancer Information Service (1 888 939-3333).

Ontario Cancer Facts are produced by the Division of Preventive Oncology.

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