



ADDICTIONS: Alcohol-related harm in the United States

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JoAnn Hummers

When considering the impact of alcohol and other drugs on communities, one common response is “I only drink alcohol, but don’t use drugs!” or “It’s only beer.” A group called Alcohol Justice describes its mission as promoting “evidence-based public health policies and organiz[ing] campaigns with diverse communities and youth against the alcohol industry’s harmful practices.” Here is their description of the problem:

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Globally, alcohol consumption causes an estimated 2.5 million deaths every year. Alcohol has been found the most harmful drug in terms of harm to both users and to other people. A 2013 study found alcohol caused nine times as many deaths annually as other drugs.

Alcohol contributes to a wide range of negative societal and personal consequences, and causes more harm than any other drug in the U.S.

Despite the alcohol industry’s claims, alcohol-related harm goes far beyond drunk driving or underage drinking.

In the United States:

- Alcohol is the third leading cause of preventable death.
- Nine percent of all deaths were attributed to alcohol consumption in 2005.
- Approximately 4,300 people under the legal drinking age of 21 die annually from injuries caused by drinking alcohol. Alcohol consumption accounts for approximately 88,000 deaths each year.
- Alcohol use is associated with physical and sexual assault, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, violence, vandalism, crime, overdose, other substance use, and high-risk behavior.
- Alcohol contributes to various illnesses such as hypertension, liver cirrhosis, chronic pancreatitis and cancers of the breast, esophagus, larynx, pancreas and liver.
- Alcohol contributes to a wide range of injuries, including motor vehicle crashes, fires, falls, drownings, and unintentional firearm injuries, even among moderate drinkers.
- Alcohol plays a role in violent crimes such as homicide, sexual assaults, domestic violence, and child abuse. Consuming more alcohol is associated with higher odds of engaging in criminal activity and being the victim of a predatory crime.

- Alcohol contributes to maternal and perinatal conditions such as low birth weight, cognitive deficiencies, and fetal alcohol disorders.
- Alcohol plays a significant role in the top four leading causes of death for youth aged 10-24: motor vehicle crashes (26%), other unintentional injuries (17%), homicide (16%), and suicide (13%).
- As many as one in three elderly adults who continue to consume alcohol into older adulthood are at risk of harm in the context of co-morbidities (21.5%), specific medication use (21.2%), or alcohol use alone (22.3%).
- In 2005 alone, there were more than 1.6 million hospitalizations and 4 million emergency room visits for alcohol-related conditions.
- An estimated 21% of all hospitalized injuries and 36% of all hospitalizations resulting from an assault are alcohol-related.
- The economic costs of alcohol are estimated to have been \$223 billion in 2006 – more than 1.5% of total GDP, and far exceeding costs of the other leading preventable causes of death in the U.S.
- The healthcare costs from alcohol-related problems amount to more than \$24 billion annually, with government paying over 60% of this cost.

Bottom Line

Far from a benign substance, alcohol use, even at moderate levels, can cause a wide variety of harm, the scope of which goes largely unrecognized by the general public and policymakers alike.

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Source: <http://alcoholjustice.org/images/factsheets/AlcoholRelatedHarm2014.pdf> Used with permission.

Jo Ann Hummers, EdD, is a Licensed Clinical Addictions Specialist, with a private practice at the Nags Head Professional Center. Her work includes assessments and treatment for DWIs and other drug offenses, smoking cessation sessions, and treatment for gambling and other addictions.