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Alcohol and public health

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Summary

Alcoholic beverages, and the problems they engender, have been familiar fixtures in human societies since the beginning of recorded history. We review advances in alcohol science in terms of three topics: the epidemiology of alcohol's role in health and illness; the treatment of alcohol use disorders in a public health perspective; and policy research and options. Research has contributed substantially to our understanding of the relation of drinking to specific disorders, and has shown that the relation between alcohol consumption and health outcomes is complex and multidimensional. Alcohol is causally related to more than 60 different medical conditions. Overall, 4% of the global burden of disease is attributable to alcohol, which accounts for about as much death and disability globally as tobacco and hypertension. Treatment research shows that early intervention in primary care is feasible and effective, and a variety of behavioural and pharmacological interventions are available to treat alcohol dependence. This evidence suggests that treatment of alcohol-related problems should be incorporated into a public health response to alcohol problems. Additionally, evidence-based preventive measures are available at both the individual and population levels, with alcohol taxes, restrictions on alcohol availability, and drinking-driving countermeasures among the most effective policy options. Despite the scientific advances, alcohol problems continue to present a major challenge to medicine and public health, in part because population-based public health approaches have been neglected in favour of approaches oriented to the individual that tend to be more palliative than preventative.

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