

Alcohol and cancer: is drinking the new smoking?

Researchers at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) have clarified the link between alcohol consumption and the risk of head and neck cancers, showing that people who stop drinking can significantly reduce their cancer risk.

According to CAMH Principal Investigator Dr. Jürgen Rehm, existing research consistently shows a relationship between alcohol consumption and an increased risk for cancer of the esophagus, larynx and oral cavity. Dr. Rehm and his team analyzed epidemiological literature from 1966 to 2006 to further investigate this association and their results, published in the September issue of the *International Journal of Cancer*, showed that:

- The risk of esophageal cancer nearly doubled in the first two years following alcohol cessation, a sharp increase that may be due to the fact that some people only stop drinking when they are already experiencing disease symptoms. However, risk then decreased rapidly and significantly after longer periods of abstinence.
- Risk of head and neck cancer only reduced significantly after 10 years of cessation.
- After more than 20 years of alcohol cessation, the risks for both cancers were similar to those seen in people who never drank alcohol.

These results have important implications for tailoring alcohol policies and prevention strategies, especially for people with a family risk of cancer.

Said Dr. Rehm, "Alcohol cessation has very similar effects on risk for head and neck cancers as smoking cessation has on lung cancer. It takes about two decades before the risk is back to the risk of those who were never drinkers or never smokers."

Alcohol is the 'drug of choice' for Canadians, with 60% of Ontario adults consuming alcohol on at least a monthly basis. The direct and indirect costs to society of alcohol abuse are substantial: \$5.3 billion in Ontario alone, second only to the social burden of tobacco. This burden takes into effect the cardioprotective effects of alcohol, which, unlike its link to cancer, has received a great deal of public attention.

Dr. Rehm notes that more research is needed on the effects of alcohol cessation on other types of cancer -- especially breast, liver and colorectal cancers, for which the International Agency for Research on Cancer has also classified alcohol as carcinogenic -- and on the effects of alcohol type, drinking patterns, and the joint effects of smoking and alcohol cessation on the risk of cancer.

Source: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

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