

Alcohol causes cancer

The medical evidence against alcohol is strong and yet it seems almost untouchable in terms of criticism in many societies. Shima Gyoh wonders quite how it has achieved such a lauded position



The news that the only drinkable alcohol, ethanol, is carcinogenic and responsible for 5.8% of cancer deaths worldwide is shocking even to most medical professionals. It shouldn't have been, because the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) declared alcohol a carcinogen in 1988. The seven sites specified are the oropharynx, the larynx, the oesophagus, colon, rectum, liver and the female breast, but the effect is suspected to be more widespread. Medical textbooks tell us that alcohol is a poison for liver cells even in minute quantities, but the liver has tremendous regenerative powers and, without other unfavourable factors, most people get away without symptomatic disease. With respect to causation of cancer, there is no variation with the beverage type: the weaker preparations of ethyl alcohol, like beers and wines have equal potency as spirits and liqueurs, and there is no safe level of drinking. Mercifully, the effect is reversible after some time on stopping drinking.

Alcohol is rapidly absorbed into the blood from the stomach, as anyone who takes a swirl on an empty stomach will feel the effect on the brain within minutes. The carcinogenic effect is obviously not from physical contact, or the sites would have been along its path from the mouth and the more concentrated preparations would be more dangerous. It also enters the cells quite rapidly. It has been stated that the biological mechanisms by which alcohol causes cancer are not well understood, but the epidemiological evidence leaves little doubt that it does. Nevertheless, the available scientific facts are for me highly convincing. In the cell, alcohol is first metabolised to acetaldehyde which can damage DNA and is a well-known carcinogen, then to acetate. The carcinogenic effect might differ at different sites as the action is multiplicative, with, for example nicotine, increasing the incidence in many sites, and with oestrogen in the breast. Unknown factors, including the genetic may operate in many ways on many other tissues. For example, slower clearance of acetaldehyde from salivary tissue may result in high concentrations and explain the higher incidence in the aerodigestive tract. The effect is reversible on cessation of intake, reaching a decrease of around 5% for hepatocellular carcinoma.

Much has been made of the cardiovascular benefit of red wine, but the claim is controversial, and if it occurs at all, it is small and related to drinking less than 14

units per week. Any benefit quickly tips over into danger when the dose is exceeded.

Ethyl alcohol has wormed its way, over the ages, into the centre stage of human existence, culture and entertainment, described as a multifaceted entity—a social lubricant and sophisticated dining companion. Tobacco also once occupied a similar secure position, but its harmful effects are more prominent, easier for the public to identify and to believe. Nevertheless, when they were publicised, society went into denial, strongly supported by the highly lucrative industry that tobacco had spawned. Despite the overwhelming reasons for the habit to become part of the history of human folly, it continues today, though admittedly, its social status has been seriously dented. Protecting the rights of non-smokers has assisted in the fight against smoking.

Alcohol drinking does not provide much opportunity for curbing moderate intake. Under conditions of overindulgence its social effects cause havoc in society and can be legislated against. Exceedingly wealthy industries have sprung up around alcohol production, most African market days occur every five days, the length of time it takes to brew alcohol from grain grown on the farm. Although a few religions ban its drinking, ritual wine drinking is part of many traditions and religions including Christianity. Habituation to alcohol is common, often passionate, and many human social activities revolve around drinking. It is the centre of the exceedingly popular nightclub life.

Denial has already set in for alcohol. Scientists in the pay of rich alcohol companies pick on scientific uncertainties and technicalities to counteract and undermine health messages, as was recently done after an international symposium on alcohol and cancer in New Zealand when another scientist associated with the alcohol industry declared that moderate drinking was safe.

Human beings have always sought for drugs that would alter their mood and their mental perception of the world. Many substances have been discovered, from tobacco, though alcohol to powerful ones like the opiates, cocaine and lysergic acid dehydrogenase. Tobacco and alcohol, two substances that have no food value were mistakes humanity made at the time it had no knowledge of their harmful effects and they have become impossible to stop. Yet we are set to repeat the mistakes as pressure groups for legalising similar substances increase their success, now for cannabis with known harmful effects even in the short run, and unknown ones in the long-term. When are we going to learn?

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