

Alcohol consumption boosts cancer death risk
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SALT LAKE CITY — A recent study suggests even moderate consumption of alcohol leads to increased risk of death from cancer.

The study, published earlier this month in the American Journal of Public Health, offered the first comprehensive update in decades to the role alcohol plays in deaths from cancer.

"Alcohol has been known to be related to causing cancer for a long period of time. We talk about cancer prevention, screenings and tests," Dr. David Nelson, director of the Cancer Prevention Fellowship Program at the National Cancer Institute and lead author of the study, told the San Francisco Chronicle. "This is one of those things that seems to be missing in plain sight."

Consuming only 1.5 alcoholic beverages a day may account for up to a third of alcohol-related cancer deaths, which in turn account for 3.5 percent of total cancer deaths in the U.S. annually. The majority of deaths were found among those who consumed more than three alcoholic beverages a day.

Researchers have thus far been unable to determine exactly why alcohol contributes to cancer deaths, although more people die annually from alcohol-related cancers than from either melanoma or ovarian cancer.

Alcohol consumption resulted in an estimated 18,200 to 21,300 cancer deaths, or 3.2% to 3.7% of all US cancer deaths, in 2009.

Seven types of cancer known to be linked to alcohol use were studied: mouth and pharynx, larynx, esophagus, liver, colon, rectum and female breast. Researchers used survey results from 220,000 adults, U.S. mortality data and sales data to determine alcohol consumption.

Among women, breast cancer was the most common alcohol-related cancer death, accounting for 15 percent of all breast cancer deaths. Among men, mouth, pharynx, larynx and esophagus cancer had the highest rates.

The study has been criticized by some. Dr. Curtis Ellison, professor of medicine and public health at Boston University School of Medicine, told the Seattle Times the study failed to take several factors into account, including the pattern of drinking rather than just the amount of alcohol consumed.

The study's authors said alcohol can have health benefits, but causes 10 times as many deaths as it prevents.

"The safest level for cancer prevention is that people don't expose themselves to any potential risk," Nelson said.