



CONSEQUENCES OF THE USE OF ALCOHOL

This section gives a brief outline of the consequences of the use of alcohol. Most communities recognize that alcohol is harmful to individuals and society, but they are usually concerned about only one or two aspects of the harm. Often they are unaware of the magnitude of damage that alcohol consumption can lead to. The visible, apparent problems of the use of alcohol are what people can see and identify with, but the many more serious, internal problems remain unrecognized and unnoticed by the community. Some of the dangers and problems associated with alcohol use and abuse are as follows:

2.1 Deaths

There is a definite link between a higher incidence of death by accident, injury, violence and suicide, and alcohol use, although in smaller communities, this correlation may not be easily recognized.

2.2 Medical Diseases

Alcohol adversely affects different organs of the body. Medical complications due to the use of alcohol can range from acute damage to the lining of the stomach to severe chronic liver damage, impotence, and loss of mental ability. Some effects are serious and occur soon after alcohol consumption; others are chronic and occur after prolonged use. While some complications can be reversed or treated by stopping the intake of alcohol, others may cause irreversible, permanent damage.

2.3 Psychiatric Diseases

Alcohol-induced mood disorders and suicide

Persons who abuse alcohol can have a variety of depressive symptoms, both during intoxication and during withdrawal from alcohol. It is found that about 50–60 per cent of alcoholics have depressive symptoms like sadness, feeling low, lack of interest and pessimistic thoughts. However, in only half of them are the symptoms severe enough to be diagnosed as

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depressive illness, which requires active treatment with anti-depressants and other supportive therapy.

Suicide rates among alcohol-dependent persons are higher than in others.

Alcohol-induced psychotic disorder

About 3 per cent of chronic heavy drinkers develop psychotic symptoms. These symptoms are varied and may range from transient, fleeting hallucinations to persistent hallucinations and delusions. The presence of hallucinations and delusions results in behavioural problems and socio-occupational impairment.

Alcohol-induced jealousy

This problem is common in alcoholics wherein they suspect their spouses of infidelity. The belief is strong enough to influence their personal and social behaviour and may sometimes lead to significant inter-personal problems.

2.4 Disability

Alcohol consumption leads to loss of productivity. This can be measured in the number of days of healthy life lost. Measured in 'Disability Adjusted Life Years' (DALYs), alcohol is found to be a relatively higher contributor than most other major causes of premature deaths (Murray and Lopez, 1996).

2.5 Psychosocial Problems

The behaviour of the dependent person affects not only the drinker but the entire family and wider society as well. In today's context, alcohol-related problems are seen as a disease affecting the whole family and as a social problem. Evidence of the role of the family and society, in both the etiology and management of the disease, means that it is essential to examine the psychosocial aspects of alcohol-related problems.

Violence or aggressive behaviour of various kinds is attributed to alcohol use. This belief is based on the assumption that alcohol makes people uninhibited. Whether violence is the result of alcohol consumption, or the acceptance of alcohol as a valid excuse, needs debate. But it is certainly true that violence after alcohol use is inflicted on the relatively powerless members of society, usually women and children. Intra-family violence is often associated with, or committed under the influence of, alcohol intoxication. A man is more often allowed to get away with abusing his wife, for example, if he has consumed alcohol.

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Commonly recognized psychosocial complications of alcohol use			
School	Family	Social	Legal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inefficiency • Poor performance • Frequent absence • Accidents in school • Suspension from school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent fights • Neglect of family duties • Physical violence with family members • Long absence and running away • Rejection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance from friends • Misbehaviour with others • Decreased social reputation • Loss of position • Social isolation • Constant borrowing • Inability to return borrowed money • Fights, quarrels, thefts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disobeying rules • Drunken driving • Thefts and petty crimes • Involvement with criminal gangs • Arrests and court cases • Conviction • Imprisonment

Source: Adapted from WHO (2003)

2.6 Limiting People's Lives


The consequences of regular alcohol use mostly go unnoticed. Consuming liquor is promoted by companies as a 'fun thing' to do but a serious consequence of regular consumption is that people's 'fun' situations become limited because they begin to depend on alcohol to relax or to enjoy socializing. With time, they begin to associate alcohol use with the mood that they want to achieve and this soon progresses to their needing alcohol to achieve these positive moods.

In the early stages this is seen as a need to have a glass of alcohol in one's hand to 'switch on' and enjoy an evening. This may soon lead to the need for at least slight intoxication to relax or 'have fun'. Soon the addict cannot relax or enjoy anything unless it includes drinking alcohol. Thus the person's life slowly begins to revolve round alcohol and his range of happy situations become limited. Alcohol alone becomes enjoyable, or relaxing.

Missing out on the wider range of experiences, situations and activities that can bring joy, relaxation or other positive feelings is a definite loss. Although alcohol is presented as an agent that increases 'pleasure' (Peele and Grant, 1999), in reality this is not the case.

2.7 Reduced Community Well-Being

When alcohol induced 'fun' means breaking social norms, it has severe repercussions on society. Social rules and norms are usually enough to protect the weak and disempowered. But when enjoyment of alcohol comes from breaking the rules, someone else may have to suffer. The

A background illustration on the left side of the page. It features a large, light-colored hand with fingers spread, positioned above several stylized faces with large eyes. The overall style is soft and painterly, with a color palette of yellows, oranges, and purples.

alcoholics' enjoyment is then bought at the cost of others' well-being. These others are commonly the weaker members of society — women, children, the powerless and the disadvantaged.

2.8 Methanol Poisoning

This is usually accidental, and occurs due to ingestion of methyl alcohol instead of ethyl alcohol. Methyl alcohol is used as a substitute during the manufacture of illicit alcohol. Instances of methanol poisoning occur more in situations of total prohibition and during periods of very tight legal controls. The adverse effects of methanol occur due to two poisonous products, formaldehyde and formic acid, which are formed when methanol is digested by the body. The toxicity of these two compounds is most pronounced on the eyes and may lead to blindness. At times death can occur due to the inability to breathe.

2.9 Purported Health Benefits of the Use of Alcohol

Some people believe that drinking small quantities of alcohol daily is beneficial for physical health, especially in preventing heart attacks. Such beliefs therefore tend to encourage alcohol consumption as a health-promoting strategy. While there is some evidence from USA and Europe, which shows that those who consume small quantities of alcohol daily have fewer heart attacks as compared to non-drinkers, the research papers documenting these findings clearly state that daily alcohol use is not, and cannot be recommended as a public health strategy for protection against heart attacks. The implication of a scientific finding of this nature is all the more important for communities such as those in the South-East Asia Region which do not as yet have a large proportion of daily social drinkers as compared to the communities in USA and Europe. A problem with daily consumption of "small quantities" of alcohol is that the quantity frequently increases to damaging levels, leading at times to alcohol dependence.

2.10 Impact of Alcohol on Marginalized Communities

Marginalized communities, which include geographically isolated communities, minorities, economically and socially deprived sections, are often victims of the harmful effects of alcohol. In these areas, alcohol is often projected as an 'escape' from the deprivation to which they are exposed. Sometimes employers will pay wages in alcohol rather than cash.

Sometimes alcohol is brewed at home. This leads to diversion of food grains to alcohol production, thus aggravating hunger and poverty. As in

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other communities, accidents while in a state of intoxication can lead to severe injury or death.

2.11 Impact of Alcohol on Young People

Alcohol use usually begins as 'experimentation', often within the family on special occasions such as birthdays or marriages. However, in the South-East Asia Region, alcohol experimentation also starts within groups of friends. Some young people move from experimentation to regular consumption and some to harmful consumption of alcohol. The first occasion of "getting drunk" is a life event of similar importance to initiation into alcohol consumption. There is anecdotal evidence that episodes of drunkenness among the young in the Member States of the Region are increasing.

There are various factors associated with alcohol consumption in the Region. Consumption of alcohol among the young is usually in the upper social strata where it is sometimes considered a status symbol. Parents' drinking habits and the attitude of the family to alcohol strongly affect children's pattern of alcohol consumption. Although drinking, unlike smoking, does not take place during the actual time spent at school, school friends usually form the first group in which alcohol consumption is initiated. The attitude of some communities in which alcohol consumption, particularly among young males, is condoned and accepted as a sign of "growing up" encourages young people to drink alcohol because any behaviour while intoxicated is excused. Availability, advertising and legal restrictions on the supply of alcohol are known to influence drinking habits among young people.


Marketing, particularly to the young, plays a critical role in the globalization of patterns of alcohol consumption. Alcohol producers spend not only on direct advertising such as television, radio and print media, but also for other promotional activities, such as sponsorships, contests and special promotions particularly of sporting events, making alcohol use increasingly popular among the young.

2.12 Impact of Alcohol on Women

Traditionally, women, like men, have consumed alcohol in some communities in the Region, particularly for rituals and on social occasions. However, in recent years, there has been an increase in alcohol consumption among young women. This is of concern for multiple reasons. First of all, women are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol because of their smaller physical build as compared to men.

Initial experimentation by some young people, may lead to harmful consumption of alcohol or addiction.





The growing alcohol consumption among young women is of great concern.

Secondly and more importantly, the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy can be very unsafe, particularly for the unborn child leading to a *fetal alcohol syndrome*. Thirdly, women play a primary role in managing households and children in communities of the Region. This responsibility is affected if women are habituated to alcohol.