

Alcohol related cancer risks underplayed by industry says new research



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A report out of the UK reveals that just like the tobacco industry tried for decades to suppress the harmful effects of tobacco and cigarette smoking, the alcohol industry too is trying to underplay the actual cancer risks associated with alcohol intake. The new research is published in the journal *Drug and Alcohol Review*.

The latest eye opening study comes from a team of researchers from London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine along with the Karolinska Institute, Sweden. The team looked at the alcohol and cancer related information that is being said on the websites of 26 alcohol industry organizations or “Social aspects and public relations organizations” (SAPROs) and similar organizations, globally between a time period of September 2016 and December 2016. They noted that of the 26 web pages, 24 provided information connecting the risk of alcohol and cancer to be distorted and a misrepresentation of the actual risks that alcohol poses in terms of development of cancers. Breast and colorectal cancers were one of the most misrepresented and faulty information areas in most of these websites. It was noted that 21 of the web sites did not warn about breast cancer.

One of the commonest misrepresentations of the information was that most websites claimed that the relationship between alcohol and cancer was highly complex. This implied that there is no direct association between alcohol consumption and risk of cancer and there has to be other risk factors present if a person develops cancer. Some sites also go on to deny the association of alcohol consumption and cancer risk especially with light or 'moderate' drinking. Some of the organizations list out several risk factors for cancer implying that alcohol consumption is one of the many risk factors that can raise the chances of getting cancer.

Bruce Lee Livingston, Executive Director / CEO of U.S-based Alcohol Justice in his statement said that the alcohol industry was going the tobacco industry way and their standard operating procedure was to “deny, distract and distort” any possible evidence that exists that says that alcohol is a dangerous disease causing agent. Their marketing ploy results in “over consumption” he said and this is linked to major harm worldwide.

Mark Petticrew, Professor of Public Health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and lead author of the study explained that the science behind the risk is clear. “drinking alcohol increases the risk of some of the most common forms of cancer, including several common cancers”. He added that public awareness of this link is low especially for breast cancer. The alcohol industry with their “responsible drinking bodies” is disseminating misleading information to the public he explained. One of the most common strategies he noted was “selective omission” of information.

The study authors write that policymakers and public health bodies must reconsider if they would want alcohol industry representatives to have a say in alcohol policy making. At present the alcohol industry plays a role in development of alcohol policies in many nations and also provides information to the public claiming safety.

The risk of cancers associated with alcohol are known and well evidenced in research. Alcohol consumption is linked to several cancers including cancers of the liver, oral cavity, breast, colorectal cancers etc. It is estimated that 4 percent of the new cancers in UK each year are linked to alcohol consumption. While some small studies have claimed that alcohol protects against renal and ovarian cancers, due to inconsistent evidence of benefits, the UK's Committee on Carcinogenicity in 2016 said that the benefits of alcohol if any are outweighed by the risks of cancers that it carries.

Study authors say that this information should start release of accurate information for greater public awareness. They say the next step would be look at other industry websites, documents as well as their other social media promotions to check for misinformation. Other health information such as risk of cardiovascular disease and liver disease as a result of alcohol consumption also needs to be looked into, they add.

Reference: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dar.12596/full>