

Alcohol-Related Harm in the United States



Globally, alcohol consumption causes an estimated 2.5 million deaths every year.¹ Alcohol has been found the most harmful drug in terms of harm to both users and to other people. One study found alcohol caused the highest level of harm, followed by heroin and crack cocaine.² Alcohol is also more lethal than other drugs such as cannabis, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and mushrooms.³

In the United States, alcohol causes more harm than any other drug.⁴ Alcohol-related harm goes far beyond just drunk driving or underage drinking. Alcohol use contributes to a wide range of negative societal and personal consequences.

In the United States:

- Alcohol is the third leading cause of preventable death.^{5, 6}
- Alcohol consumption accounts for an estimated 79,000 deaths annually.^{5, 6}
- Approximately 5,000 people under age 21 die annually from injuries caused by drinking alcohol.⁷
- Alcohol use is associated with physical and sexual assault, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, violence, vandalism, crime, overdose, other substance use, and high-risk behavior.^{5, 7}
- Alcohol contributes to various illnesses such as hypertension, liver cirrhosis, chronic pancreatitis, and cancers of the breast, esophagus, larynx,⁸ and pancreas.⁹
- Alcohol contributes to a wide range of injuries, including motor vehicle crashes, fires, falls, drownings, and unintentional firearm injuries.¹⁰
- Alcohol plays a role in violent crimes such as homicide, sexual assaults, domestic violence, and child abuse.¹¹
- Alcohol contributes to maternal and perinatal conditions such as low birth weight, cognitive deficiencies, and fetal alcohol disorders.¹²
- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death of people under the age of 35; alcohol is involved in more than one-half of these fatal crashes.¹³
- As many as one in three elderly adults who continue to consume alcohol into older adulthood are at risk of harm in the context of co-morbidities (21.5%), specific medication use (21.2%), or alcohol use alone (22.3%).¹⁴
- In 2005 alone, there were more than 1.6 million hospitalizations and 4 million emergency room visits for alcohol-related conditions.¹⁵
- The economic costs of alcohol are estimated to have been \$220 billion in 2005.¹⁶
- The healthcare costs from alcohol-related problems amount to more than \$26 billion annually. That's \$686 for every person living in the U.S.¹⁷

Bottom Line: Far from a benign substance, alcohol use, even at moderate levels, can cause a wide variety of harm, the scope of which goes largely unrecognized by the general public and policymakers alike.

continued on page 2

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