Alcohol-Related Cancer Deaths Nearly Doubled Since 1990

The increase was seen mostly in men, who accounted for about 70% of alcohol-related cancer deaths in 2021.

May 28, 2025 By Laura Schmidt

Deaths from alcohol-related cancers in the United States nearly doubled between 1990 and 2021—from about 12,000 deaths per year to just over 23,000, according to findings to be presented at the 2025 American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) Annual Meeting in Chicago.

Consumption of alcohol—including wine and beer—is the third leading preventable cause of cancer in the United States, after tobacco use and obesity.

Alcohol likely causes cancer through several processes. First, the alcohol (technically, it is known as ethanol) breaks down to acetaldehyde, which is a carcinogen. As the National Cancer Institute explains, alcohol also generates a type of oxygen molecules that can damage DNA. What's more, it increases estrogen, which is known to promote breast cancer.

The new study focused on seven of the most common types of alcohol-related cancers: breast, colorectal, esophagus, liver, mouth, throat and voice box (larynx).

Analyzing data from the Global Burden of Disease database, researchers found that men accounted for about 70% of alcohol-related deaths in 2021, with more than 16,500 deaths, according to Medical Xpress. From 1991 to 2021, alcohol-related cancer deaths in men increased from 2.5% to 4.2% and in women from 1.46% to 1.85%.

"That's a big and concerning rise," said lead researcher Chinmay Jani, MD, a hematology and oncology fellow at the University of Miami's Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, in a news release, according to Healthday.

Most alcohol-related cancer deaths in 2021 were caused by liver cancer (7,408), colon cancer (4,687) and esophageal cancer (3,948).

On a state level, Washington, DC, had the highest alcohol-related mortality rate across both sexes, and Utah had the lowest.

“We need to increase awareness of this link among the general population and even in the medical field,” Jani added. “There’s a lot of awareness about, for example, tobacco and the risk of cancer. But for alcohol, that awareness isn’t there.”

In January, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, issued an advisory highlighting the link between alcohol and cancer and recommending steps to lower these rates. The advisory urges, for example, that health warning labels on alcohol containers be updated to include cancer risk.

“Alcohol is a well-established, preventable cause of cancer responsible for about 100,000 cases of cancer and 20,000 cancer deaths annually in the United States—greater than the 13,500 alcohol-associated traffic crash fatalities per year in the U.S.—yet the majority of Americans are unaware of this risk,” Murthy said.

In fact, a 2019 survey by the American Institute for Cancer Research found that only about 45% of Americans know that alcohol is linked to cancer, compared with 89% who recognize tobacco as a cancer risk factor.

“Despite growing awareness of alcohol as a risk factor for cancer development, alcohol continues to contribute significantly to cancer mortality,” the study authors wrote. “Our findings highlight the critical need for targeted prevention efforts and increased awareness to address the rising impact of alcohol consumption on cancer-related mortality.”

To read more, click #Alcohol or #Cancer Risk. There, you’ll see headlines such as “How We Could Test for Unhealthy Alcohol Use Before It’s Too Late,” “Alcohol is a Leading Cause of Cancer, But Will the Public Heed a New Warning?” and “Most Black and Latina Women Use Personal Care Products With Cancer-Causing Formaldehyde.”

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