



Alcohol and harm reduction

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In many ways, Canada is a world leader in effective tobacco control and many jurisdictions are devoting resources in an effort to reduce the high toll of unhealthy eating and a lack of physical activity on morbidity and mortality.

Unfortunately, far less attention is paid to alcohol as a relevant health issue. It mostly shows up as an issue in the media when there is an alcohol-related tragedy, usually related to drinking and driving. Given alcohol's status as the leading risk factor for ill-health, injury and disability in North America, perhaps it's time we devoted more attention to the reduction of alcohol-related harm.

About 80% of Canadian adults consume alcohol, mostly in moderation. Still, alcohol is associated with a wide range of harms including the development of chronic diseases, acute injuries, trauma and violence.

In 2002, alcohol was responsible for 8% of all deaths under the age of 70 and 7% of all hospital days in Canada. Alcohol use also interacts with other risk factors such as tobacco use and unhealthy diets to substantially increase health risks.

The costs associated with alcohol use are high. The burden on health care and law enforcement services as well as costs associated with the loss of productivity in the home or workplace due to alcohol are very high. In more than half of provinces, a comparison of direct revenue and costs from alcohol shows an overall deficit. It would make a lot of sense, then, to reduce the harms of alcohol and to do so with a public health approach:

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treating the overall problem with population-wide efforts including education, policies and laws.

Several types of alcohol policy have been shown to be effective in not only reducing population levels of damage, but also modifying the behaviour of high-risk drinkers.

A report produced by the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health called "Strategies to Reduce Alcohol-Related Harms and Costs in Canada" provides a systematic evaluation of policies and programs across all Canadian provinces which have the potential to reduce the considerable health and social harms from alcohol. Their recommendations are extensive, but their general recommendation is that governments in all sectors and non-governmental organizations that deal with alcohol issues should be encouraged to collaborate.

They also offer specific policy recommendations including the setting of minimum prices at a level that will discourage excessive consumption and maintenance of government monopolies by preventing further privatization of alcohol sales. Implementing mandatory server training and challenge and refusal programs both help control over-consumption, especially by minors.

There is much potential for achieving the public health and safety benefits from effective alcohol policies. In order to reduce alcohol-related harm in Canada, there must be concerted action in more than any one area, and an emphasis on both population-level policies and interventions which target high-risk drinkers.