



# NURSING MATTERS

*Nursing Matters fact sheets provide quick reference information and international perspectives from the nursing profession on current health and social issues.*

## Harmful Use of Alcohol

# Fact Sheet

### Introduction

Harmful use of alcohol is an avoidable risk factor for many diseases and social problems. Harmful use of alcohol encompasses many aspects of drinking. First is the amount of alcohol consumed. Other aspects include the pattern of drinking which can range from regular or occasional drinking to intoxication, and the quality of alcoholic beverage or toxic substance, for instance methanol, contained in it.<sup>1</sup>

Alcohol consumption has adverse health and social consequences including:

- intoxication (drunkenness), dependence (habitual, compulsive and long-term drinking),
- a major cause of premature death,
- intentional and unintentional injuries,
- several infectious and non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, liver cirrhosis, cancers, mental diseases, and
- sexually transmitted infections including HIV infection.

Alcohol is estimated to cause about 3.7% of all deaths; with 2.3 million premature deaths, and 4.4% of the global burden of disease. In addition, harmful use of alcohol is associated with several adverse social consequences, such as crimes, violence, unemployment, and absenteeism. Recently, the negative impact of alcohol use in young people and women across the world is of increasing concern.<sup>2</sup> The ICN, for example, in its policy on Elimination of Substance Abuse in Young People, expressed concern about the growing number of youths who abuse dependence producing substances and the resulting impact on their health.

### What influences alcohol consumption?

In order to design effective interventions against harmful use of alcohol, it is important to understand the factors that impact on the problem. Alcohol use in many cultures is often rooted in social and cultural environment, and linked with personal characteristics, which include.<sup>3</sup>

- Age, gender, physiological and psychological status, personal awareness of adverse effects of alcohol use;
- Social, economic and cultural values, and norms of the family including acceptance and approval of individual's pattern of drinking alcohol;
- Accessibility, affordability and acceptability of alcohol use by society;
- Socio-cultural attributes of peer group influence, personal status and attitudes of society towards alcohol use;
- Advertisement and media portrayal of alcohol use as “masculine” and “attractive” shape people’s values and thinking process; and
- Legal status of alcohol and legal actions against those who cause damage while under the influence of alcohol.

In many societies alcohol use is associated with celebrations including weddings, birth, and academic achievement and job promotions. The advice to use “alcohol in moderation” has often led to mixed and contradictory messages about alcohol and its consumption perhaps undermining health policies and strategies to reduce alcohol-related harm.

### **What are the consequences of harmful use of alcohol?**

Alcohol has a toxic effect that can harm almost every organ of the body. The harmful use of alcohol has both acute and long-term adverse effects on health, social and economic factors. The acute effects of alcohol are associated with risk behaviours including unsafe sex, which can lead to sexually transmitted infections such as HIV infection, accidents and injuries due to drunken driving or operating machinery, and violence. Long-term effects of alcohol include more than 60 disorders and can exacerbate chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, breast cancer, hepatitis C, and liver cirrhosis. Chronic harmful use of alcohol can compromise the immune system and increase risk to infectious diseases including bacterial pneumonia.<sup>4</sup> Alcohol is a “psychoactive substance” that can affect the central nervous system, resulting in disturbances in motor function, cognitive process, mood, perception, and behaviour changes. These effects can cause major social problems.<sup>5</sup>

“Social harms” related to harmful use of alcohol includes disruptions in the family, community and workplace, violence and crimes. Other consequences of harmful use of alcohol include job loss, involvement in crime and arrest. These consequences affect the person using alcohol as well as the family, community and society.<sup>6</sup>

Adverse effects of harmful use of alcohol on individual health, family and community have led to economic burden in terms of health care and societal costs. Worldwide alcohol causes 1.8 million deaths (3.2% of total) with unintentional injuries alone accounting for about one third of the 1.8 million deaths.<sup>7</sup> The health care costs include cost of treating injuries and alcohol-related diseases as well as rehabilitation costs.<sup>8</sup> Societal costs include cost related to property loss, unemployment, road traffic injuries, and pain and suffering to family.<sup>9</sup>

## **W**hat are the strategies to reduce harmful use of alcohol?

Strategies for reducing harmful use must be designed to achieve several aims including delaying initial alcohol use, reducing the number of people who misuse alcohol, minimising harmful patterns of alcohol use and changing behaviour of alcohol consumption.<sup>10</sup> The literature identifies a number of strategies to reduce harmful alcohol use.<sup>11, 12, 13</sup>

- *Strengthen health promotion, prevention and education* to increase public awareness and enhance the capability of individuals and communities to participate in reducing harmful consequences of alcohol misuse. To be effective, using knowledge-based understanding of the cultural and social contexts of alcohol drinking and a combination of measures that target the population at large, vulnerable groups (i.e. young people and pregnant women) have to be considered.
- *Increase community-based action*, with involvement of different stakeholders, such as community leaders, religious organisations, health promotion organisations, consumer associations and trade unions, is an effective strategy to minimise harms related to alcohol drinking. The actions can increase community perception related to the harms, reduce the acceptability to excessive alcohol use and mobilise the community against the unregulated selling and using alcohol.
- *Regulate availability of alcohol* in order to control alcohol consumption and accessibility. This strategy includes regulating production and distribution of alcoholic beverages such as minimum legal purchasing age, restricted hours and days of sale, restricting retail sales and density of outlet, and controlling price, advertising and promotion.
- *Support and enact drink-driving policy* to reduce alcohol drink-driving and the adverse consequences and severity of traffic crashes. The policy has to address a low limit for blood alcohol concentration of drivers and suspension of driving licences.
- *Strengthen health sector response* through involvement and training of health care professionals in early detection of problems related to alcohol consumption and prevention of more serious conditions. Treatment and community services for people with alcohol use disorders are effective when supported by adequate policies and systems and integrated in a broader preventive strategy.

## **W**hat actions can nurses and National Nurses Associations (NNAs) take?

Nurses and NNAs have an important role in reducing or eliminating harmful use of alcohol. NNAs can take the following actions:

- Collaborate with government, community and other organisations to disseminate information on the harmful consequences of alcohol and to implement strategies to reduce alcohol misuse;
- Support integration of preventive programmes related to harmful use of alcohol into nursing education and continuing education;
- Urge the government to develop policies on alcohol in order to minimize harm through access to prevention and treatment;

- Be involved in research related to alcohol issues such as rates, trends and disease burden; nursing interventions targeted to high risk group; barriers to implement prevention interventions; and patient-centred treatment approaches; and
- Support policies and interventions that are based on human rights

Nurses and NNAs can be key stakeholders in strengthening health sector response against harmful use of alcohol including prevention, treatment, care and rehabilitation services.

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