



REUTERS

Alcohol-linked deaths a problem for the Americas

By Elizabeth DeVita-Raebrun

NEW YORK Tue Feb 4, 2014 4:04pm EST

(Reuters Health) - Liver disease and brain disorders due to alcohol abuse are important causes of premature death in the Americas, a new study concludes.

The toll of too much drinking is especially high among men and among middle-aged people, according to the report, whose authors say it's the first to tabulate deaths resulting solely from alcohol.

"This provides direct evidence of the impact of alcohol on the health of countries in the region," said one of the study's authors, Dr. Vilma Pinheiro Gawryszewski, an advisor on health information and analysis for the Pan American Health Organization(PAHO).

In the 16 North, Central, and South American countries studied, alcohol was the sole cause of 79,456 deaths a year, the researchers say. That represented 1.4 percent of deaths from all causes, and alcohol-related liver disease alone accounted for 0.6 percent of all-cause mortality.

The study was based on data collected between 2007 and 2009 for countries in the PAHO mortality database.

The researchers excluded deaths from vehicle accidents and other fatal situations where alcohol might have been involved but there could also have been other causes.

Looking just at deaths due directly to alcohol, they found 63 percent were from liver disease and 32 percent were from neurological and psychiatric conditions grouped under "degeneration of the brain and nervous system."

Other listed causes of death included alcohol poisoning, alcohol-linked heart and gastric problems and fetal alcohol syndrome.

The death toll is the "tip of the iceberg," meaning that there are probably many more alcohol-related deaths that the researchers were not able to identify, said another of the study's authors, Dr. Maristela Monteiro, regional advisor on alcohol and substance abuse at PAHO.

Monteiro said that raising the price of alcohol and increasing taxes would help to prevent some of these deaths. Many countries have found these steps effective in controlling [tobacco](#) use, but such measures have not been used to control alcohol consumption, she said.

Even the U.S., which was included in the study, has not done as much as it could, said David Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol [Marketing](#) and Youth at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"The single most efficient thing you can do is to raise taxes," Jernigan told Reuters Health. "Many states haven't raised it in decades. That means the price doesn't go up with inflation, and alcohol gets cheaper every year."

And while the U.S. and other countries have limited [tobacco advertising](#), alcohol advertising "is virtually everywhere," he said.

Mortality due to alcohol was highest in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, with death rates of 27.4, 22.3 and 21.3 per 100,000 people, respectively. These were also the countries with the highest consumption of hard liquor, the authors noted.

Colombia, [Argentina](#) and Canada had the lowest death rates attributable to alcohol at 1.8, 4.0 and 5.7 per 100,000, respectively. The alcohol death rate in the United States was "intermediate," at 6.7 per 100,000, Monteiro said.

Men accounted for 84 percent of the deaths overall, but that proportion was not the same in all countries. The risk of a man dying from alcohol in El Salvador was nearly 30 times higher than that of a woman, but only about three times higher in Canada and the U.S.

People in the mid-to-late 50s and 60s age range were at the highest risk. This later in life risk, Jernigan said, points to the long-term impact of heavy drinking.

"Mostly in this country, we talk about alcohol and the risk for the young," in whom drunk driving, violence, and accidents are important causes of death, Jernigan said. "This really shows the impact over the life course."

Despite the grim statistics, Jernigan says studies like this one are a positive sign.

"On one hand, you could say, 'this is a huge problem, and not enough is being done.' On the other," he said, "you could say, 'we're getting better at documenting it and showing that, until we take meaningful action, it's not going to go away.'"

In poorer countries, other factors contributing to the deaths could include infectious diseases that hasten the course of liver disease, as well as poor nutrition and limited access to health services.

"In the U.S., people wouldn't wait until they were too sick for help to seek out services, because treatment is available," said Monteiro. That is not always the case, she said, in other countries.

Source: bit.ly/1enwJIT Addiction, online January 14, 2014.