



DEBATE PACK

Number CDP 2016/0129, 27 June 2016

Guidelines on alcohol consumption

This pack has been prepared ahead of the debate on **guidelines on alcohol consumption** to be held in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 28 June 2016 at 4.30pm. The Member in charge is **Byron Davies**.

Dr Sarah Barber
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Contents

1.	Summary	2
2.	News items	5
3.	Press releases	7
4.	Parliamentary Questions	18
5.	Useful links and further reading	22

The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

1. Summary

The UK Chief Medical Officers published new alcohol consumption guidelines in January 2016. Prior to this publication, two expert groups had reviewed the evidence on the effects of alcohol consumption on health, and looked at the best way to provide this health information to the public. The guidelines have been subject to a consultation¹ which closed in April 2016, having received 1017 responses.² The outcome to the consultation has not been published yet.

The guidelines include a number of changes since the original recommendations in 1995. The [NHS Choices website](#) provides an overview of the new guidelines:

Regular drinking

The guidance advises that:

- to keep health risks from drinking alcohol to a low level you are safest not regularly drinking more than 14 units per week – 14 units is equivalent to a bottle and a half of wine or five pints of export-type lager (5% abv) over the course of a week – this applies to both men and women
- if you do drink as much as 14 units per week, it is best to spread this evenly over three days or more
- if you have one or two heavy drinking sessions, you increase your risks of death from long-term illnesses and from accidents and injuries
- the risk of developing a range of illnesses (including, for example, cancers of the mouth, throat and breast) increases with any amount you drink on a regular basis
- if you wish to cut down the amount you're drinking, a good way to achieve this is to have several alcohol-free days each week

Single drinking sessions

The new proposed guidelines also look at the potential risks of single drinking sessions, which can include accidents resulting in injury (causing death in some cases), misjudging risky situations, and losing self-control.

You can reduce these risks by:

- limiting the total amount of alcohol you drink on any occasion
- drinking more slowly, drinking with food, and alternating alcoholic drinks with water

- avoiding risky places and activities, making sure you have people you know around, and ensuring you can get home safely

Some groups of people are more likely to be affected by alcohol and should be more careful of their level of drinking. These include:

- young adults
- older people
- those with low body weight
- those with other health problems
- those on medicines or other drugs

Drinking and pregnancy

The guidelines recommend that:

- if you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all, to keep risks to your baby to a minimum
- drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby, with the more you drink the greater the risk³

At the time of the publication of the guidelines, the Chief Medical Officer for England, Professor Dame Sally Davies said that they aim to give the public the latest and most up to date scientific information so that they can make informed decisions about drinking:

Drinking any level of alcohol regularly carries a health risk for anyone, but if men and women limit their intake to no more than 14 units a week it keeps the risk of illness like cancer and liver disease low.

I want pregnant women to be very clear that they should avoid alcohol as a precaution. Although the risk of harm to the baby is low if they have drunk small amounts of alcohol before becoming aware of the pregnancy, there is no 'safe' level of alcohol to drink when you are pregnant.

What we are aiming to do with these guidelines is give the public the latest and most up to date scientific information so that they can make informed decisions about their own drinking and the level of risk they are prepared to take.⁴

The guidelines have been welcomed by a number of health organisations such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence⁵, Cancer Research UK⁶ and the Royal College of General Practitioners⁷. However, concerns have been expressed by representatives from the alcohol and hospitality industry.⁸

The Royal Statistical Society (RSS), in its submission to the Department of Health consultation on the guidelines, recommended that they

³ NHS Choices, [New alcohol advice issued](#), 8 January 2016

⁴ Department of Health, [News story: New alcohol guidelines show increased risk of cancer](#), 8 January 2016

⁵ NICE, [New recommended drinking guidelines welcomed by NICE](#), 8 January 2016

⁶ CRUK, [New alcohol guidelines to help cut cancer risk](#), 8 January 2016

⁷ RCGP, [RCGP response to new alcohol guidelines](#), 8 January 2016

⁸ The Drinks Business, [UK alcohol guidance 'out of line' with Europe](#), 8 January 2016

*"should be less prescriptive and 'genuinely reflect the principle of informed choice."*⁹ The Chief Medical Officer has addressed the concerns raised, in a letter to the President-Elect of the RSS, Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter.¹⁰ She said that overall tone of the guidance was not prescriptive, that they are guidelines and are about giving information. She also said it was important to get the balance right in communicating complex scientific information.

This debate pack includes press and parliamentary material and links to further reading on this subject.

More information on the production of the guidelines and final proposed recommendations can be found in the following reports:

- [UK Chief Medical Officers' Alcohol Guidelines Review Summary of the proposed new guidelines, January 2016](#)
- [Alcohol Guidelines Review – Report from the Guidelines development group to the UK Chief Medical Officers, January 2016](#)

A recently updated Commons library briefing paper [Statistics on Alcohol](#) provides information about alcohol consumption and alcohol related ill health.

⁹ Statslife, [RSS responds to alcohol consumption guidelines consultation](#), 31 March 2016

¹⁰ Department of Health blog, [Chief Medical Officer's letter on alcohol guidelines evidence](#), 22 January 2016

2. News items

Guardian

Experts call for warnings on all alcohol as men refuse to believe risks

Sarah Boseley 13 May 2016

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/may/13/warnings-alcohol-middle-age-men-refuse-believe-risks>

GP

Alcohol misuse: new government guidelines

Dr Anna Cumisky 9 March 2016

<http://www.gponline.com/alcohol-misuse-new-government-guidelines/health-promotion/alcohol/article/1386283>

Telegraph

Health chiefs attacked over 'nanny state' alcohol guide

Laura Donnelly 8 January 2016

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/12088101/Health-chiefs-attacked-over-nanny-state-alcohol-guide.html>

BBC

Alcohol limits cut to reduce health risks

By Nick Triggle 8 January 2016

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35255384>

Guardian

How do the UK's new alcohol guidelines compare with the rest of the world's?

George Arnett 8 January 2016

<http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2016/jan/08/how-do-the-uks-new-alcohol-guidelines-compare-with-the-rest-of-the-worlds>

Independent

New alcohol guidelines: How is drinking linked to cancer?

Sarah Williams 8 January 2016

<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/new-alcohol-guidelines-how-is-drinking-linked-to-cancer-a6802596.html>

BBC

New alcohol guidelines: What you need to know

8 January 2016

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35252650>

3. Press releases

Royal Statistical Society

RSS responds to alcohol consumption guidelines consultation

31 March 2016

The new guidelines on alcohol consumption should be less prescriptive and 'genuinely reflect the principle of informed choice', the RSS has recommended in [its response to a Department of Health consultation](#).

The RSS says that the guidelines 'should acknowledge the minimal risks of the recommended low levels of alcohol consumption' and that focus should also be given to the higher-risk levels of consumption, such as 35 units per week for women and 50 for men. It recommends that the low-risk threshold be set as an 'aspirational' target, while acknowledging there is a trade-off against the perceived benefits of moderate levels of alcohol consumption.

The RSS response also points out that setting a limit of 14 units a week for both men and women gives the misleading impression that men and women have the same resilience to alcohol.

The Society acknowledges that the government 'has a complex task in communicating complex statistical information to the public' and suggests that infographics, such as the following, could help communicate the nuances of the level of risk involved.

<i>Risk level</i>	<i>Weekly consumption - Women</i>	<i>Weekly consumption - Men</i>	<i>Guidance</i>
	35 units or above	50 units or above	Unacceptable, high risk - must reduce from this level
	14 to 35 units	14 to 50 units	Try to reduce to 14 units or as low as you can
	14 units or below	14 units or below	Broadly acceptable, low risk

The RSS president Peter Diggle and president-elect David Spiegelhalter [wrote to the health secretary in January](#) this year, urging the DH to ensure that the guidelines properly reflect the statistical evidence, and [David Spiegelhalter has written a blog post on the subject](#).

BMJ

11 February 2016

New alcohol guidelines unlikely to have a direct impact on drinking *But they may alter social attitudes towards alcohol*

The UK's new alcohol guidelines are unlikely to have a direct impact on drinking, but they do raise awareness of harm and so may alter social attitudes towards alcohol, suggests an expert in The BMJ today.

Professor Theresa Marteau, Director of the Behaviour and Health Research Unit at the University of Cambridge – and a member of the committee that produced the guidelines - says while there is little direct evidence about any impact of health related guidelines on behaviour, including for alcohol, novel risk information can change behaviour.

The new alcohol guidelines present novel information on the link between alcohol and cancer.

She points out that, in the week after publication of the new guidelines, Google Trends showed more searches for “alcohol and cancer” compared with the same week in 2015. No similar increase occurred in searches for “alcohol and heart disease” or “alcohol and health.”

Although more online searching may not reflect less consumption, she says strengthening one negative association with alcohol “may weaken the influences of the many positive associations forged by alcohol marketing.”

These include associations between alcohol and sport and comedy, which most 10 year olds recognise.

Few people oppose governments intervening to provide information about risks to their health as a prelude to potential behaviour change, explains Professor Marteau.

As expected, the public is less accepting of interventions to reduce alcohol consumption based on pricing policies than for providing information or reducing advertising, particularly among heavier drinkers.

But she says that people “are more accepting of increases to a minimum price for a unit of alcohol when they see evidence of its effectiveness at reducing hospital admissions and crime related to alcohol, an effect seen in other policy domains such as obesity.”

She believes that the new alcohol guidelines “are unlikely to have a direct impact on drinking. But they may shift public discourse on alcohol and the policies that can reduce our consumption.”

And she concludes that, as the debate around the guidelines continues, with dominant references to the nanny state and the killing of joy, “we should keep in focus the objective of alcohol policies: to reduce the blight without losing the delight that alcohol brings.”

Notes to Editors:

Observations: *Will the UK's new alcohol guidelines change hearts, minds - and livers?* <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.i704>

Department of Health

New alcohol guidelines show increased risk of cancer

8 January 2016

Updated alcohol consumption guidelines give new advice on limits for men and pregnant women.

New [guidelines for alcohol consumption](#), produced by the UK Chief Medical Officers, warn that drinking any level of alcohol increases the risk of a range of cancers. This is supported by a new review from the Committee on Carcinogenicity (CoC) on alcohol and cancer risk .

It is now known that the risks start from any level of regular drinking and increase with the amount being drunk, and the new guidelines are aimed at keeping the risk of mortality from cancers or other diseases low. The links between alcohol and cancer were not fully understood in the original guidelines, which came out in 1995.

This review also found that the benefits of alcohol for heart health only apply for women aged 55 and over. The greatest benefit is seen when these women limit their intake to around 5 units a week, the equivalent of around 2 standard glasses of wine. The group concluded that there is no justification for drinking for health reasons.

These issues prompted changes to alcohol guidelines for men. Men should not drink more than 14 units of alcohol each week, the same level as for women. This equals 6 pints of average strength beer a week, which would mean a low risk of illnesses such as liver disease or cancer. The previous guidelines were 21 units for men and 14 units for women per week.

An additional recommendation is not to 'save up' the 14 units for 1 or 2 days, but to spread them over 3 or more days. People who have 1 or 2 heavy drinking sessions each week increase the risk of death from long term illnesses, accidents and injuries. A good way to reduce alcohol intake is to have several alcohol free days a week.

The guidelines for pregnant women have also been updated to clarify that no level of alcohol is safe to drink in pregnancy. The previous advice for pregnant women to limit themselves to no more than 1 to 2 units of alcohol once or twice per week has been removed to provide greater clarity as a precaution.

Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England, said:

Drinking any level of alcohol regularly carries a health risk for anyone, but if men and women limit their intake to no more than 14 units a week it keeps the risk of illness like cancer and liver disease low.

I want pregnant women to be very clear that they should avoid alcohol as a precaution. Although the risk of harm to the baby is low if they have drunk small amounts of alcohol before becoming aware of the pregnancy, there is no 'safe' level of alcohol to drink when you are pregnant.

What we are aiming to do with these guidelines is give the public the latest and most up to date scientific information so that they can make informed decisions about their own drinking and the level of risk they are prepared to take.

Advice on single episodes of drinking is included in the guidelines for the first time. To keep the short term health risks low:

- limit the total amount of alcohol drunk on any one occasion
- drink more slowly, with food and alternate with water

Guidance about a set number of units for a single occasion or day was considered. However, partly because the short term risks for individuals vary so widely, this is not currently included in the guidelines. Whether the new guidelines should include a specific number of units, as a simple number can be easier to follow than more general advice, is included in the [consultation](#).

This new advice follows a detailed review of the scientific evidence used for the guidelines in 1995. This work has been underway since 2013, led by a panel of experts in public health, behavioural science and alcohol studies.

The development of the new guidelines was chaired by Professor Mark Petticrew, Professor of Public Health Evaluation at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and by Professor Sally Macintyre, Professor Emeritus at the University of Glasgow

Professor Petticrew, said:

This new guidance has been based on a wide range of new evidence from this country and overseas. We have reviewed all the evidence thoroughly and our guidance is firmly based on the science, but we also considered what is likely to be acceptable as a low risk level of drinking and the need to have a clear message.

The [CoC's latest findings](#) support the significant links from alcohol to cancer outlined in the new guidance.

The CoC review found that drinking even a small amount of alcohol increases the risk of some cancers compared with people who do not drink at all. The risk of getting some alcohol related cancers gradually reduces over time when people stop drinking, but can take many years before the risk falls to the levels found in people who have never drunk alcohol.

Royal College of General Practitioners

RCGP response to new alcohol guidelines

08 January 2016

Dr Richard Roope, Cancer Lead for the Royal College of GPs, said: "GPs are not killjoys but the links between alcohol consumption and a number of serious health conditions cannot be ignored.

“Half of all alcohol related deaths are as a result of cancer and recent figures estimate that alcohol causes 4800 cases of bowel cancer, over 3000 cases of breast cancer, more than 2000 cases of oral cancer, and thousands of cases of other cancers each year.

“Medical advances have increased our knowledge of the dangers of alcohol consumption significantly since the original guidelines were produced over 20 years ago. Also, trends in alcohol consumption have changed – so we welcome that these new guidelines take into account, for example, greater awareness of the dangers of binge drinking.

“Ultimately, we want our patients to enjoy long and healthy lives, so we would urge our patients to take these new guidelines seriously and consider their attitudes towards consuming alcohol as part of a healthy lifestyle, in the best interests of their long term health and wellbeing. Small changes can have a big impact with research suggesting that if average alcohol consumption dropped by just one unit per person per day, we would avoid 8% of cancer deaths.”

Nuffield Trust

Our response to new guidance on alcohol consumption

08 January 2016

Researchers at the Nuffield Trust health think tank published a report on 22nd December [which showed the extent of the challenge to the NHS posed by harmful drinking](#). Commenting on the new guidance on alcohol consumption from the Chief Medical Officer today, report author Dr Alisha Davies said:

“The CMO’s evidence based guidelines for alcohol consumption are welcome, given the rising demands alcohol related harm is placing on health services and wider society. Our research before Christmas found worrying trends in attendances and admissions to hospital specific to alcohol. The rate at which people are entering NHS wards for reasons specific to alcohol has gone up by over 50% in the past nine years.

The number of admissions now tops a quarter of a million a year. We also found those with alcohol related liver disease tended to be associated with higher hospital use for up to five years before diagnosis, underlining how this condition can come from a person’s health deteriorating in a way that could be preventable. These statistics, however, are at the extreme end of harmful drinking, and only represent the tip of the iceberg.

“The CMO’s clear message is that drinking any alcohol can have harmful effects on health. It’s not always an easy message, but people who drink really do need to watch their intake carefully”.

NICE

New recommended drinking guidelines welcomed by NICE

8 January 2016

NICE has welcomed proposed new guidelines on alcohol which aim to limit the health risks that result from drinking.

The proposed guidelines, published by the Department of Health and out for consultation, make 3 main recommendations on safe levels of alcohol consumption.

Alcohol is one of the biggest avoidable risks for disease and death. Between 2010 and 2011, [alcohol misuse](#) led to 1.2 million hospital admissions 15,000 deaths.

Alcohol misuse also carries an [economic burden](#) costing the NHS around £3.5 billion per year, with annual cost to society in England of around £21 billion.

The latest proposed guidelines follow a review of existing guidelines by three independent groups of experts, and have been considered and accepted by the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMO).

The guidelines set out the following recommendations:

- A weekly guideline on regular drinking
- Advice on single episodes of drinking
- A guideline on pregnancy and drinking

New weekly guidelines for people who drink regularly or frequently

The proposed guidelines say that any level of drinking raises the risk of a range of illnesses that include cancers of the mouth, throat and breast.

Men are now advised to drink no more than 14 units per week to keep their health risks at a low level. This is the same level advised for women.

The guidelines recommend that it is best to spread the amount of alcohol consumed over 3 days or more. Having one or two heavy drinking sessions increases the risks of death from long-term illnesses and accidents and injuries.

The guidelines also advise that a good way to reduce alcohol intake is to have several alcohol-free days a week.

Short-term risks can be avoided by limiting the amount of alcohol consumed on any one occasion, drinking more slowly, and drinking with food and alternating with water.

For pregnant women, or those planning a pregnancy, the guidelines say the safest approach is to drink no alcohol at all to keep risks to the fetus to a minimum.

The advice is that drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby, with the more you drink, the greater the risk.

NICE advice on alcohol to prevent illness in later life

The guidelines follow and complement [NICE advice](#) on the prevention of illness in later life which was published October 2015.

NICE guidance states that alcohol consumption can increase the risk of dementia, disability and frailty. As such people should be encouraged to reduce the amount they drink as much as possible.

Recommendations include making alcohol less accessible, affordable and acceptable, continuing to work to prevent illicit alcohol sales, and ensuring plans include screening and brief interventions for people at risk of an alcohol-related problem.

Further recommendations cover changes to modifiable risk factors that can reduce a range of non-communicable disease such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and certain cancers.

Help with making informed choices on alcohol consumption

Commenting on the new DH guidelines, Professor Gillian Leng, Deputy Chief Executive and Health and Social Care Director at NICE, said: "NICE welcomes these proposed new guidelines on alcohol, which set out 3 main recommendations on drinking. We know that alcohol-related harm is a major public health problem, and that generally, people in this country are currently drinking more than they should do."

She added: "NICE has recently produced [guidance](#) on mid-life approaches to delaying or preventing the onset of dementia, disability and frailty in later life which outlines clear, evidence-based recommendations on ways to encourage people to reduce the amount they drink.

"Both this, and the proposed new Department of Health guidelines should help people make informed choices on their alcohol consumption."

Baroness Delyth Morgan, Chief Executive at Breast Cancer Now, said: "This is a real step in the right direction on alcohol in the UK. We welcome the CMO's recommendation as we've known for some time that regularly drinking alcohol increases your risk of developing breast cancer.

"There is unfortunately no 'safe' alcohol limit when it comes to increasing one's cancer risk. It's imperative that men and women fully understand the risks involved and that clear information about the alcohol content of all drinks is now provided."

Sir Ian Gilmore, Chair of the Alcohol Health Alliance UK, who sat on the group advising the CMOs, added: "People have a right to know the risks associated with drinking alcohol. Only with accurate and transparent information are people able to make an informed choice about how much alcohol they consume."

Alcohol Health Alliance

AHA welcomes new drinking guidelines

8 January 2015:

Cancer Link Leads to New Recommended Drinking Guidelines

Strengthening evidence of the link between alcohol and cancer is just one of a number of reasons which has led the UK's Chief Medical Officers to recommend a tightening of the drinking guidelines.

The new guidelines, based on recommendations from a group of independent experts who carried out the first comprehensive review of the advice in 20 years, have been welcomed by the Alcohol Health Alliance (AHA), which represents over 40 organisations with an interest in reducing the harm caused by alcohol.

In welcoming the announcement, Professor Sir Ian Gilmore, Chair of the AHA, said: "The new guidelines from the CMOs are based on evidence that the risks of getting a range of cancers increase at low levels of alcohol consumption. New evidence also shows there are no grounds to recommend drinking on health grounds."

The new recommendations, which bring the UK into line with countries like Australia and Canada, say it is safest for both men and women not to drink regularly more than 14 units of alcohol a week if they want to keep health risks to a low level. Fourteen units is the equivalent of half a bottle of whisky.

They also state it is advisable to spread the units evenly over three days or more, warning that one or two heavy drinking sessions increase the risk of death from long term illnesses and from accidents and injuries.

Professor Gilmore, who sat on the group advising the CMOs, added: "People have a right to know the risks associated with drinking alcohol. Only with accurate and transparent information are people able to make an informed choice about how much alcohol they consume."

According to Katherine Brown, Director of the Institute of Alcohol Studies, too many people are currently unaware of the risks they are exposing themselves to by drinking too much: "Worryingly, the AHA's recent survey of public opinion showed that only around one in two people are aware that drinking alcohol increases your cancer risk. That figure falls to as low as one in three for breast cancer.

"We call on the Government to make it compulsory to include health warning labels on alcohol products and to adequately fund mass media campaigns which make it clear the risks people run if they choose to drink above the recommended guidelines."

The CMOs have also said that it is safest to avoid drinking in pregnancy, a message which has been warmly welcomed by organisations representing parents whose children are affected by a range of conditions caused by being exposed to alcohol while in the womb.

A range of health bodies and charities have lined up to support the CMOs' new recommendations.

Commenting on the guidelines Professor Linda Bauld, Cancer Research UK's expert on cancer prevention, said: "The link between alcohol and cancer is now well established, and it's not just heavy drinkers who are at risk. There is no 'safe' level of drinking when it comes to cancer – the less you drink, the lower your risk.

"Many people still don't know that alcohol increases the risk of seven types of cancer, including breast, mouth and bowel cancers. Drinking levels in the UK are almost double what they were in 1960, so it's vital we invest in national health campaigns to provide people with clear information about the health risks of drinking alcohol, particularly at levels above these new guidelines.

"Much more needs to be done to reduce the impact of alcohol on health, and these guidelines are a welcome step in the right direction. Having at least two consecutive alcohol free days a week is a good way to start cutting back on the booze and it's better for your liver. Also try making every other drink a soft one or water, instead of an alcoholic one."

Baroness Delyth Morgan, Chief Executive at Breast Cancer Now, said: "This is a real step in the right direction on alcohol in the UK. We welcome the CMO's recommendation as we've known for some time that regularly drinking alcohol increases your risk of developing breast cancer.

"There is unfortunately no 'safe' alcohol limit when it comes to increasing one's cancer risk. It's imperative that men and women fully understand the risks involved and that clear information about the alcohol content of all drinks is now provided. Importantly, while you cannot change some things that affect your breast cancer risk, such as getting older, alcohol is not only one of the most important factors but it is one you really can do something about."

The current guidelines, which were introduced in 1995, took into account evidence which at the time indicated that drinking make have some protective effects on the heart, a position which has changed in the past 20 years.

Portman Group

Portman Group Statement on New Alcohol Guidelines

8 January 2016

Responding to the UK Chief Medical Officers, Alcohol Guidelines Review, Henry Ashworth, Chief Executive, Portman Group said:

"The vast majority of us - more than four in five adults – drink within the current lower risk guidelines. Guidelines are important because they help people make informed choices about their own drinking so it's vital that they are trusted and understood by consumers. What is surprising

is that the UK is breaking with established international precedent by recommending the same guidelines for men and women. It also means that UK men are now being advised to drink significantly less than their European counterparts.”

Key figures:

77% of adults drink 14 units a week or fewer (i.e. within or below the new guidelines) ([Health and Social Care Information Centre, December 2015](#))

By gender:

- 68% of men drink 14 units a week or fewer (HSCIC, 2015)
- 85% of women drink 14 units a week or fewer (HSCIC, 2015)

(As a comparison, the HSCIC figures show that 83% of adults drank within or below the previous weekly ‘lower risk’ guidelines of 21 units a week for a man and 14 units per week for a woman. By gender: 78% of men drank 21 units a week or fewer and 85% of women drank 14 units a week or fewer.)

International comparisons:

- 37 countries set alcohol guidelines.
- 33 countries recommend daily limits and of these 10 also set weekly guidelines.
- Only four countries (Denmark, Malta, Luxembourg and Ireland) recommend weekly limits without daily guidelines.
- 32 countries (whether they provide daily or weekly guidelines or both) clearly distinguish men from women in the advice they give.
- There are only five countries that recommend the same guidelines for men and women: Australia, Netherlands, Albania, Guyana and Grenada.

There are no countries that provide only weekly guidelines and also recommend the same limits for men and women.

Royal Society for Public Health

New alcohol guidelines debunk health myths from light drinking

8 January 2016

RSPH welcomes the introduction of [new alcohol guidelines](#) by the Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies. The new guidelines, which follow the first review for over 20 years, includes a reduction in the recommended intake for men from 21 units to 14 units per week, the same limit as women, and also, recommends that drinkers spread their weekly units evenly over three or more days. The new guidelines place

the UK below the world average for weekly alcohol intake for both men and women.

Over the past decade, rates of alcohol consumption have slowly declined. In 2005, when alcohol consumption peaked, 19% of adults stated that they do not drink at all, increasing to 21% by 2013. Similarly, in 2005, 18% of adults stated that they binge drink at least once per week, decreasing to 15% by 2013. These statistics, however, belie the concerning behaviours within the drinking population, namely the greater propensity of middle age and older people to drink on a daily basis and the continuing burden of alcohol-related disease.

The new guidance reflects a greater understanding of some of the health risks associated with alcohol. Research has shown that alcohol is a factor in the development of over 60 medical conditions, including heart disease, stroke and some cancers, with men bearing the brunt of alcohol-related harm (men account for roughly 65% of alcohol related deaths). It is of concern that approximately 1 in 20 of all new cancers in the UK are caused by alcohol consumption. And while consumption has been declining, well over half (59%) of local authorities in 2014 reported seeing a rise in alcohol-related hospital admissions. The new guidance advocates a level of drinking at which the risks to health are lower, rather than a safe level of drinking alcohol.

Shirley Cramer, Chief Executive of RSPH, stated that:

“Excessive alcohol consumption causes untold harm to the public through alcohol-related disease and associated social problems, costing an estimated £21 billion each year. Considerable progress has been made in recent years to educate the public and encourage healthier behaviour, but further action is required.

We welcome the new guidelines as a means of moderating alcohol consumption which will in turn have health benefits for the public. The new guidelines reflect the modern reality of alcohol availability and consumption, and critically, reinforce the message that alcohol should be viewed as a product for occasional consumption rather than a diet staple. As well as lowering the recommended amount of alcohol people should consume, we welcome the guidance to spread the amount over three or more days, to counter bingeing.

The new guidance needs to be accompanied by action on all fronts, including clearer health information on alcohol, such as calorie labelling and further investment in alcohol and educational programmes. For example, we need to do more to increase public understanding of alcohol units –only around 1 in 4 people knew 1 unit was “less than a small glass of wine” with around half of people wrongly thinking 1 glass of wine equalled 1 unit. Efforts should also be made to lower the default strength and serving size for alcohol served in pubs and bars.”

4. Parliamentary Questions

[Heart Diseases: Alcoholic Drinks](#)

Asked by: Percy, Andrew

To ask the Secretary of State for Health, what assessment he has made of the implications for Government policies of medical and scientific evidence on the effect of moderate alcohol consumption on the risk of death from cardiovascular disease.

Answering member: Jane Ellison | Department: Department of Health

The United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers have made an assessment of the effect of moderate alcohol consumption on cardiovascular disease, as well as other conditions such as cancer, as part of their review of the alcohol guidelines. The alcohol guidelines give the public the latest and most up to date scientific information so they can make informed decisions about their own drinking. The advice can be read here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/health-risks-from-alcohol-new-guidelines>

HC Deb 13 June 2016 | PQ 39595

[Alcoholic Drinks: Consumption](#)

Asked by: Murray, Ian

To ask the Secretary of State for Health, what assessment he has made of the implications for his Department's policies of the UK Chief Medical Officer's revised alcohol guidelines, published in January 2016.

Answering member: Jane Ellison | Department: Department of Health

The UK Chief Medical Officers' (CMOs) alcohol guidelines give the public the latest and most up to date scientific information so that they can make informed decisions about their own drinking. Government has a responsibility to ensure this information is provided for citizens in an open way.

The Government launched a public consultation seeking views on the advice from the UK CMOs. The final guidelines and the Government response to the consultation will be published shortly.

HC Deb 13 June 2016 | PQ 38959

[Alcoholic Drinks: Consumption](#)**Asked by: Davies, Byron**

To ask the Secretary of State for Health, what assessment he has made of the potential effect of the Chief Medical Officer's revised guidelines on alcohol consumption on consumer behaviour.

Answering member: Jane Ellison | Department: Department of Health

The National Institute for Health Research has awarded funding to The University of Sheffield Alcohol Research Group to evaluate the new drinking guidelines. The details will be worked through once the conclusions of the consultation are published.

HC Deb 01 June 2016 | PQ 37858

[Alcoholic Drinks: Consumption](#)**Asked by: Davies, Byron**

To ask the Secretary of State for Health, how many consumers and organisations have made representations on the Chief Medical Officer's revised guidelines on alcohol consumption.

Answering member: Jane Ellison | Department: Department of Health

We have received 1,017 responses to the UK Chief Medical Officers' alcohol guidelines consultation, including responses as part of a campaign and responses that did not answer some or any of the specific consultation questions.

HC Deb 01 June 2016 | PQ 37857

[Alcoholic Drinks: Consumption](#)**Asked by: Davies, Byron**

To ask the Secretary of State for Health, how many EU member states have adopted guidance recommending the same level of weekly alcohol consumption for men and women.

Answering member: Jane Ellison | Department: Department of Health

No other European country has carried out a full scientific review of their alcohol guidelines at least in the last ten years.

HC Deb 01 June 2016 | PQ 37856

[Alcoholic Drinks: Misuse](#)

Asked by: Lord Chadlington

To ask Her Majesty's Government, in the light of the UK Chief Medical Officers' alcohol guidelines review, what steps they are taking to educate young people about the dangers of drinking.

Answering member: Lord Prior of Brampton | Department: Department of Health

Public Health England's Rise Above social marketing programme aims to reduce the uptake of risky behaviours, including alcohol consumption, by young people aged 11-16. It teaches them the skills required to make better decisions in 'risky' situations to delay and prevent them from engaging in exploratory behaviours.

Talk to FRANK is a web-based information service that explains the effects and risks of excessive alcohol consumption. It also provides a help service via phone, text, live chat and email for people who are concerned about their own or others' alcohol consumption. Talk to FRANK is an independent Government funded programme.

The Government also commissions the Alcohol and Drug Education and Prevention Information Service to enable schools to understand and implement evidence-based approaches to preventing harmful alcohol use by children and young people.

In the new science curriculum, there are opportunities for young people to be taught about the dangers of drinking: for example, at key stage 2, pupils should be taught to "recognise the impact of diet, exercise, drugs and lifestyle on the way their bodies function", or in biology at key stage 3, where pupils will learn about "the effects of recreational drugs (including substance misuse) on behaviour, health and life processes".

HL Deb 23 March 2016 | PQ HL6847

[Alcoholic Drinks: Consumption](#)

Asked by: Stringer, Graham

To ask the Secretary of State for Health, what assessment he has made of the national trend in the consumption of alcohol (a) in total, (b) by men and (c) by women since 2005; and what estimate he has made of the number of (i) men and (ii) women who are drinking above the level recommended by Chief Medical Officer alcohol guidelines.

Answering member: Jane Ellison | Department: Department of Health

HM Revenue and Customs alcohol factsheet October 2013 provides data on alcohol consumption. The trends on alcohol consumption since 2005 can be found in Section 2 – Clearances, 2.3 Alcohol Clearances per Adult at:

<https://www.uktradeinfo.com/Statistics/Pages/TaxAndDutyBulletins.aspx>

An estimated 6,746,000 men and 3,549,000 women were drinking above the United Kingdom Chief Medical Officer's alcohol guidelines

prior to the recent revision, using Health and Social Care Information Centre, Health Survey for England 2014 data.

HC Deb 03 March 2016 | PQ 28731

5. Useful links and further reading

Department of Health *UK Chief Medical Officers' Alcohol Guidelines Review: Summary of the proposed new guidelines*

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/489795/summary.pdf

Department of Health *Alcohol Guidelines Review – Report from the Guidelines development group to the UK Chief Medical Officers* January 2016

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/489797/CMO_Alcohol_Report.pdf

Department of Health closed consultation *Health risks from alcohol: new guidelines* 8 January – 1 April 2016

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/health-risks-from-alcohol-new-guidelines>

Royal Statistical Society response

<http://www.rss.org.uk/Images/PDF/influencing-change/2016/RSS-response-alcohol-guidelines-consultation-March-2016.pdf>

British Medical Journal *Will the UK's new alcohol guidelines change hearts, minds—and livers?* 10 February 2016

<http://www.bmj.com/content/352/bmj.i704>

Department of Health *Chief Medical Officer's letter on alcohol guidelines evidence* 22 January 2016

<https://healthmedia.blog.gov.uk/2016/01/22/chief-medical-officers-letter-on-alcohol-guidelines-evidence/>

Cancer Research UK Science Blog *New alcohol guidelines to help cut cancer risk* 8 January 2016

<http://scienceblog.cancerresearchuk.org/2016/01/08/new-alcohol-guidelines-to-help-cut-cancer-risk/#6jj2ZWuhqirfGqOb.99>

NHS Change4Life *Alcohol units and guidelines*

<http://www.nhs.uk/change4life/Pages/alcohol-lower-risk-guidelines-units.aspx>

Drinkaware *alcohol limits and unit guidelines*

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/alcohol-facts/alcoholic-drinks-units/alcohol-limits-unit-guidelines/>

Drinking and You *Units and guidelines*

<http://www.drinkingandyou.com/site/uk/moder.htm>

Institute of Alcohol Studies *A Good Measure: Units and drinking guidelines*

<http://www.ias.org.uk/Alcohol-knowledge-centre/Consumption/Factsheets/A-good-measure-Units-and-drinking-guidelines.aspx>

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