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Higher than expected rates of U.S. alcohol abuse disorders

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Disorders related to the abuse of alcohol contribute significantly to the burden of disease in the U.S., finds a new study in *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*. Researchers estimated that in 2005, about 53,000 men and 12,000 women died from issues related to alcohol use disorders (AUD).

The results of the meta-analysis were surprising, said lead author Jürgen Rehm, Ph.D., director of social and epidemiological research at the Centre of Addiction and Mental Health at the University of Toronto in Canada. "We had done meta-analyses on AUD before and knew it would be higher than previous literature, but we did not expect the burden for disease to be so high."

Previous research has shown that heavy drinking is a risk factor for more than 200 diseases or injuries. To quantify the influence of alcohol use on the burden of disease, researchers analyzed information from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions and the burden of disease study of the National Institutes of Health and found that AUD was linked to three percent of all deaths in adults 18 and older in the U.S.

Alcohol use disorders contributed even more significantly to a measure of disease burden known as years lived with disability (YLD), with 1,785,000 YLD for men and 658,000 YLD for women in 2005.

Stuart Gitlow, M.D., psychiatrist and president of the American Society of Addiction Medicine agreed that alcohol is definitely linked to burden of disease in the United States. "But the problem is everyone in the field defines AUD, a fairly new term, differently. For example, alcohol can lead to morbidity such as in traffic accidents, but this may have nothing to do with addiction, abuse and dependence."

Reducing burden of AUD on society needs to have a multi-pronged approach, said Rehm, and prevention can't be regulated by health care policy makers. "There needs to be restrictions on the availability of alcohol. Increases in taxation or bans of advertisements are not part of health care, and this is part of the problem."

Rehm explained it will take the same long-term perspective as used with tobacco to implement more effective measures in curbing alcohol use. "The most realistic short-term goal is probably an increase in brief intervention and treatment rates."

Gitlow added that alcohol is a public health issue and its cost to society is huge. "Today, at the ongoing high societal rate that alcohol is consumed in the U.S., there is little that can be done to prevent it. But the simple

truth is alcohol has significant risks and minimal benefits."

More information: Rehm, J. et al. (2013). Burden of disease associated with alcohol use disorders in the United States. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*.

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