

Alcohol taxes can reduce death rates among chronic heavy drinkers

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Adjusting the alcohol tax in Florida to account for inflation since 1983 would prevent 600 to 800 deaths each year in that state from diseases caused by chronic heavy alcohol use, according to a new study from the University of Florida. The Florida legislature last increased alcohol taxes in 1983.

The new study, which analyzed death rate and tax data from 1969 to 2004, is published in the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* (ACER). It was conducted by Mildred M. Maldonado-Molina, Ph.D., and Alexander C. Wagenaar, Ph.D., of the Department of Epidemiology and Health Policy Research, University of Florida, College of Medicine, Gainesville.

"Previous studies conducted in the United States and other countries have clearly shown that increasing alcohol taxes is associated with reduced overall consumption of alcohol as well as reduced heavy drinking. This new study shows that increasing taxes on alcohol also influences the death rate from liver cirrhosis, pancreatitis, gastric diseases, some cancers, and cardiovascular diseases caused by heavy alcohol use," according to Maldonado-Molina. The University of Florida study did not include deaths from traffic crashes, crime and violence associated with alcohol use, and therefore understates the total health effects of alcohol taxes.

A similar previous study by these investigators examined the effects of two substantial tax increases in Alaska. The Alaska study also found

large reductions in alcohol-related death rates associated with the tax increases. But because Alaska has a much higher rate of alcohol-related deaths than the national average and because Alaska is different in many physical, demographic, and social characteristics than the lower 48 states, the authors designed the Florida study to see if similar results would be found in another more typical state.

The Florida legislature last increased the per gallon tax on beer in 1983 from \$0.40 to \$0.48, the per gallon tax on wine from \$1.75 to \$2.25, and the per gallon tax on spirits from \$4.75 to \$6.50, and those rates remain in effect today. "Because of the effects of inflation over the years, Florida's alcohol taxes in real terms are now only a quarter of what they were back in the 1960s," according to Wagenaar. "Simply returning the real tax rates to their levels in the 1960s would save the lives of some 1,500 Floridians per year from alcohol-related disease. "

The cause-of-death data for the Florida study came from the US National Vital Statistics System of the National Center for Health Statistics, and are based on information physicians provide on each individual death certificate. The study used those data through 2004, the last year for which such data were available when the study was started. The study controlled for many other factors using data on economic conditions and non-alcohol-related deaths in Florida as well as similar data from other comparison states.

The study used population-based alcohol-related deaths from January 1969 to December 2004 for Florida as well as comparison states, analyzing the trends over time with statistical models to ensure that the reduction in [death rates](#) were specifically due to the effects of alcohol taxes, not other factors also changing over time.

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