

Is it time for global guidelines on safe levels of drinking?

January 22 2013, by Jacqui Bealing



A comparison of drinking guidelines around the world shows there's little consensus between countries on what constitutes safe or sensible alcohol consumption, say University of Sussex researchers.

Psychologists Dr Richard de Visser and Nina Furtwängler looked at government guidelines issued in 57 countries, including all 27 European Member States, and found "a remarkable lack of agreement" about what constitutes harmful or [excessive alcohol consumption](#) on a daily basis, a weekly basis and when driving.

Their study, published this month in *Drug and Alcohol Review*, showed there was also no consensus on whether it was safe for women to be drinking as much as men.

In particular, they found:

- Some countries refer to standard drinks, but do not define them in grams of ethanol (e.g., Kenya, Malta)
- Some countries do not define standard drinks, but offer general guidance encouraging [moderate alcohol consumption](#) and/or [abstinence](#) in certain circumstances (e.g., Belgium, India, Norway, Western Samoa)
- [Muslim countries](#) and eight of the 27 EU member States (including Cyprus, Greece and Hungary) do not have readily accessible guidelines.
- A standard unit of alcohol in Slovakia is 14g of [ethanol](#) compared with 8g in the UK.
- Among the 124 countries that allowed drivers to have alcohol in their blood, there was a ten-fold variation between the least (e.g., Panama) and most generous (e.g., [United Arab Emirates](#)).

Dr de Visser says: "We were surprised at the wide variation in guidelines. There is no international agreement about whether women should drink as much as men or only half as much. In some countries the weekly maximum is simply seven times the daily maximum, whereas in others there is an explicit statement that drinkers should have at least one alcohol-free day a week."

Dr de Visser acknowledges that guidelines have limited success in encouraging moderation and that some young people often use alcohol labelling to deliberately drink at unsafe levels.

He adds: "Despite these caveats, it is important for people who do want to adhere to recommendations to drink responsibly that there should be internationally agreed standard definitions of alcohol units and consumption guidelines. Agreed guidelines would be useful for international efforts to reduce alcohol-related harm by increasing people's capacity to monitor and regulate their [alcohol consumption](#)."

More information: Furtwaengler, N. and de Visser, R. Lack of international consensus in low-risk drinking guidelines, *Drug and Alcohol Review* (January 2013). [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... 012.00475.x/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dar.12047)

Provided by University of Sussex

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