

New alcohol guidelines unlikely to have a direct impact on drinking

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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."

More information: Will the UK's new alcohol guidelines change hearts, minds - and livers? The *BMJ*, www.bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.i704

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