



**The Drinking Population and Average Alcohol Consumption in Hong Kong are on the Rise
The Academy Appeals for Joint Efforts
To Reduce the Harmful Effects of Alcohol Consumption**

Press Conference

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According to the World Health Organization (WHO), alcohol is the third leading global risk for burden of disease, and alcohol has estimated to cause 2.5 million¹ deaths every year or 4% of all deaths globally². Over-consumption of alcohol is closely associated with more than 60 diseases, such as cirrhosis of the liver, stroke, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and various cancer; the behaviors of a person affected by alcohol can also pose serious risks on family and the society³.

Recent statistics show that the drinking population and average alcohol consumption are on the rise in Hong Kong, which increasingly pose a tremendous burden to society. Thus, through public education, the Hong Kong Academy of Medicine wishes to enhance public awareness on the harmful effects of alcohol, and through collaboration with other concerned parties, propose and implement relevant measures for better public health protection.

A Rising Trend of Alcohol Consumption in Hong Kong

With reference to local statistics, **Dr MAK Sin Ping, President of the Hong Kong College of Community Medicine**, stated that the drinking population and the average alcohol consumption are on the rise in recent years, for example:

- There is an increase in the prevalence of drinking among the adult population in Hong Kong from 30.9% in 2005 to 34.9% in 2010^{4,5}.
- The alcohol consumption per capita in Hong Kong has risen from 2.57 liters in 2004 to 2.64 liters in 2010³.

Dr MAK said that the decrease in the price of alcoholic beverages was one of the factors that increased alcohol consumption. According to data, as the duty for wine and liquor with an alcoholic strength of less than 30% had been waived since February 2008, the average consumption of wine (with a low alcoholic strength) had significantly increased by 30% in the same year³. **Dr MAK**

¹ Alcohol fact sheet (World Health Organization). URL: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs349/en/index.html> Assessed on 16 April 2012.

² Global status report on alcohol and health (World Health Organization). URL: http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/msbgsruprofiles.pdf Assessed on 16 April 2012.

³ Action Plan to Reduce Alcohol-related Harm in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Department of Health). URL: http://www.dh.gov.hk/tc_chi/pub_rec/pub_rec_ar/pdf/ncd_ap2/action_plan_whole_document_c.pdf Assessed on 16 April 2012.

⁴ Statistics on behavioural risk factors-2005(HKDOH). URL: <http://www.chp.gov.hk/en/data/4/10/280/202.html> Assessed on 19 April 2012.

⁵ Statistics on behavioural risk factors-2010(HKDOH). URL: <http://www.chp.gov.hk/en/data/4/10/280/440.html> Assessed on 19 April 2012

explained, “The public is responsive to price. When they are able to purchase alcoholic beverages at a relatively low price, this will then stimulate their demand. It generally reflects a correlation between the price of alcoholic beverages and alcohol consumption.”

Another point that warrants our attention is that nowadays drinking is non-exclusive to adults; and more and more young people consume alcohol. A survey conducted by the Narcotics Division of the Security Bureau found that 64.9% of the respondents (secondary school students) consumed alcoholic beverages⁶. The Population Health Survey of 2003 and 2004 also showed that the prevalence of underage drinking (reported to have started drinking before 18 years of age) was highest in the age group 15-24³.

On the other hand, binge drinkers are also mainly youngsters³, as reminded by **Dr MAK**, “Young people have not well mastered their self-control yet, they are more prone to becoming binge drinkers. Therefore, the increasing trend in young people consuming alcohol is a problem that must be tackled, so as to prevent them from depending on alcohol or even abusing alcohol.”

Alcohol Intake may induce Alcoholic Hallucinosis and Alcoholic Delusiveness

Alcoholism is intertwined with many mental health conditions. **Dr CHEUNG Wai Him, Honorary Secretary of the Hong Kong College of Psychiatrists**, stated “When a person is intoxicated with alcohol, his mental process, behavior and judgment might be beyond control, the person may speak loudly, appear overactive or behave impulsively. Further increase in blood ethanol concentration can lead to slurring of speech, unsteady gait, and slow response. The person may even become unconscious, comatose, or experience breathing difficulties, which increases the risk of death.”

Even if alcohol did not lead to immediate harm, long-term alcoholism could induce psychiatric illness or exacerbate co-existing psychiatric conditions. **Dr CHEUNG** continued to point out “Excessive use of alcohol in the long-term can trigger alcohol-related mental illness, including alcohol related psychotic disorders (with hallucination or delusions), alcohol-related memory loss, and alcoholic dementia; alcohol use may exacerbate a wide variety of psychiatric syndromes, such as anxiety disorder, panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, depression, bipolar affective disorder and schizophrenia.” **Dr CHEUNG** also warned that an individual may experience alcohol withdrawal syndrome if he or she attempts to reduce alcohol intake after alcohol dependence has developed, and the symptoms range from tremulousness and insomnia to confusional state and epilepsy, thus it can be seen that alcohol abuse is immensely damaging.

Alcohol is a High Risk Carcinogen; Excessive Alcohol Consumption may impose damage to the Cerebral Nervous System

Presently, increasing amounts of evidence indicate that alcohol poses significant damage to our body. **Dr LI Chung Ki, President of the Hong Kong College of Physicians**, said that a long-term alcohol abuse may result in malnutrition, poor vitamin absorption; it also attributes to various diseases such as memory disorders, radiculopathy, and visual impairment. Also, excessive alcohol intake may lead to an irreversible damage of the brain. A study has showed that 35% of head injuries are associated to alcohol and drug⁷, and nervous system diseases like cerebral atrophy, cerebellar degeneration, dementia, polyneuropathy, and myopathy can also be a result of long-term drinking.

⁶Chapter 1 Prevalence of substance use among secondary students (Narcotics Division, Security Bureau) URL: http://www.nd.gov.hk/pdf/survey_drug_use/2008-2009/Ch1.pdf Assessed on 16 April 2012.

⁷ Haydel MJ et al., *N Engl J Med*. 2000 343:100-5

Dr LI said that alcohol consumption is correlated to cancer occurrence, and alcoholic beverages have been classified as a group 1 carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (**IARC**), with sufficient evidence that it would weigh up the risk of oral cancer, pharynx and larynx cancer, lung cancer, gastric cancer, esophageal cancer, colorectal cancer, liver cancer, and breast cancer^{8,9}. Consistent findings indicate that the consumption of alcohol may result in serious adverse effects on health.

Alcohol affects the next generation and ruins family relationships

Alcohol's damaging effect is not limited to an individual, but his or her entire family, as well as the next generation can be affected. **Dr CHAN Ming Wai, Vice-President of the College of Family Physicians**, said "Many studies showed that if pregnant women drink, not only would their risk of miscarriage increase, but they also increase their infants' risk of developing congenital malformations, as well as growth and developmental problems, such as lower weight and length than the normal infants, under-developed brain, and other congenital deformities; in turn, this increases their chance of growth impairment and mental retardation¹⁰, and the effects may prolong into adulthood¹¹."

If women drink during lactation, aside from effects on breastfeeding performance, alcohol can affect the infant's mental and behavioral development^{12,13}, thus increase the incidence of learning disabilities and behavioural problems.

Also, alcohol is one of the culprits for ruined family relations. Referring to a local study, **Dr CHAN** said that if a husband has a habit of alcohol abuse, the risk of domestic violence is six times in comparison with other families¹⁴. **Dr CHAN** said "Alcohol not only harms the health of one's own children, but also has a negative impact on family life, which in turn has far-reaching impact on society as a whole."

Drink-Driving increases the risk of serious injuries for road users

Alcohol adversely affects the entire society, and an example is drink-driving. **Dr TSUI Kwok Leung, Council Member of the Hong Kong College of Emergency Medicine**, said "Alcohol slows down reaction time, blurs vision, affects the co-ordination of the body's movements, and impairs judgment of speed and distance." The medical sector recognized that alcohol consumption could lead to various accidents, such as work-related injuries, alcohol-related violence, accidental falls, and traffic accidents. **Dr Tsui** also mentioned, a local study has found that in drink-driving, not only the drivers suffer injuries from road accidents, but other road users are 4 times more at risk of severe injuries¹⁵." According to the statistics from a police traffic report, in 2010 there were 1,147 drivers in Hong Kong who were found to be exceeded the prescribed limits of blood alcohol, which constituted a 12% increase from 2009; 802 people were convicted of a crime related to drink-driving, a 45% increase from 2009 which had 553 convictions^{16,17}. **Dr TSUI** emphasized that each case of

⁸ Bann R et al., *Lancet Oncol.* 2007 8:292-293.

⁹ Parkin DM, *Br J Cancer.* 2011 105:S14- S18.

¹⁰ Foster RK and Marriott He, *Nutr Bull.* 2000 31:286-331.

¹¹ Jacobson JL and Jacobson SW, *Alcohol Res Health.* 2002 26(4): 282-286.

¹² Ho E, Collantes A, Kapur BM et al., *Biol Neonate.* 2001 80:219-22.

¹³ Giglia RC & Binns CW, *Nutr Diet.* 2006 63: 103-16.

¹⁴ Tsui KL et al., *Hong Kong Med J.* 2006 12:289-293.

¹⁵ Tsui KL et al., *Hong Kong j. emerg. med.* 2010 17:34-3.

¹⁶ Traffic Report-2010 (Hong Kong Police Force Traffic Branch Headquarters). URL: http://www.police.gov.hk/info/doc/traffic_report_2010_tc.pdf
Assessed on 16 April 2012.

¹⁷ Traffic Report-2009 (Hong Kong Police Force Traffic Branch Headquarters). URL: http://www.police.gov.hk/info/doc/traffic_report_2009_tc.pdf
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drink-driving posed harm to road users and society, thus one must strive to minimize its occurrence.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Alcohol adversely affects individuals, families, and society as a whole, leading to serious and immense impacts; therefore, it is necessary to execute a series of policies in regards to alcohol, to help minimizing the harmful effects and the financial burden it creates on healthcare and society¹⁸.

In 2008, the WHO provided a number of strategies to reduce the alcohol related harm, which includes¹⁹:

- 1. Government's commitment to implement policies to reduce the alcohol related harm:** Spearheaded by health organizations, the public is to be made aware of the harmful effects of alcohol, and suggest the government to implement policies and co-ordinate efforts to reduce the harm of alcohol.
- 2. Healthcare staff to actively participate in work related to the treatment and prevention of the harmful effects of alcohol:** Health organizations should assist with the treatment and prevention of health problems associated with alcohol, and be a gatekeeper for the healthcare system, such as finding out whether a patient has a habit of drinking and to interfere (such as encouraging patients to quit drinking.)
- 3. Promote community activities to increase public knowledge on the harmful effects of alcohol:** Promote all sorts of activities in the community to increase the public's awareness of the harmful effects of alcohol. Specifically, youths and other high risk groups should be targeted - by prohibiting vendors from selling alcoholic beverages to minors and supporting an alcohol-free environment, with the aim to reducing their intention to drink.
- 4. Develop measures to combat drink-driving:** Promote and implement policies to combat drink-driving, build a penalizing mechanism to reduce the incidence of drink-driving; to improve the environment for driving, and to reduce the threat of drunk-drivers to other road users.
- 5. Increase the monitoring of high risk groups:** Use various policies to reduce the negative impact of alcohol, such as increasing the police force at night-time and increasing the watch on night clubs to reduce the incidence of drunken individuals' violent and disruptive actions.
- 6. Prohibit illegal alcoholic beverages:** Actively minimize illegal alcoholic beverages, to reduce the risk of alcohol poisoning.
- 7. Monitor and collect statistics in relation to drinking behavior:** Collect statistics in relation to drinking behavior, to assess the public's drinking habits, the numbers regarding diseases caused by the use of alcohol, its morbidity and mortality; estimate the harm caused by alcohol usage such as the healthcare costs to society, so as to improve the existing policies.
- 8. Regulate the availability of alcohol:** Use legal policies to limit the provision of alcohol, such as limiting the permits of retail sale, and to raise the legal age for drinking.
- 9. Regulate the advertising, marketing and sponsorship activities in relation to alcoholic beverages:** To reduce youths from picking up drinking habit.
- 10. Regulate the pricing of alcohol and the system of taxation:** Promote policies on the pricing of alcohol, change the taxation of alcohol. Adequate taxation can increase the price of alcohol, which is one of the most effective ways to reduce alcohol related harm.

¹⁸ Anderson P et al., *Lancet*. 2009 373:2234-2246.

¹⁹ Strategies to reduce the harmful use of alcohol (WHO). URL: http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/A61/A61_13-en.pdf Accessed on 16 April 2012

Of the above ten measures to reduce alcohol related harm, the 3 most effective interventions are to limit the availability of alcohol, regulate the advertising, marketing and sponsorship activities, and to regulate the pricing and system of taxation of alcohol. The Department of Health in Hong Kong published the ‘Action Plan to Reduce Alcohol-related Harm in Hong Kong’ last year, which confirmed that it is a main priority in public health to reduce the use of alcohol in Hong Kong. **Dr MAK Sin Ping, President, Hong Kong College of Community Medicine**, said “To effectively reduce the harmful effects of alcohol, besides educating the public on health issues, it is important that individuals, families, organizations, and communities join forces and participate to build a healthy environment and reduce the burden created by alcohol to society and healthcare.”

Media Inquiry

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Supplemental information:

1. On the global burden which alcohol created:

- In 2004, alcohol-related deaths worldwide was 3.8%, with 69.38 million disability adjusted life years (a measure of the years lost due to illness, and the sum total of the years in which there was a loss in productivity due to illness), or 4.5% of the global disease burden².
- The years lived with disability due to alcohol-related illnesses increased from 19.10 million in year 2000 to 22.00 million in 2004²⁰.
- In high-income countries, alcohol led to an indirect cost loss of 72.1%; the healthcare costs related to alcohol were 12.8%, and law enforcement costs were 3.5%².
- Globally there were already 320,000 deaths in youths between 15-29 years due to alcohol-related illness, which made up 9% of all deaths due to illness in that age group¹.

2. On drinking behavior in Hong Kong

- The percentage of adults who drank (The percentage of those who drank at least 1 glass of alcoholic beverage within the 30-day-period before they were interviewed.) increased by 4%, from 30.9% in 2005 to 34.9% in 2010. Within this group, the increase for females was higher by 5.1%, from 19.5% in 2005 to 24.6% in 2010^{4,5}.
- The average alcohol consumption in Hong Kong continues to be on the rise, based on a measure of pure alcohol, there was an increase from 2.57 liters in 2004 to 2.64 liters in 2010³.
- According to a survey conducted by International Wine and Spirit Research, people in Hong Kong consumed more alcohol than other Asian countries. On average, each person in Hong Kong drank 6.3 bottles (4.7 liters) of wine in 2010, which doubled the amount of consumption in Japan and Singapore, and quadrupled that of China²¹.
- Average wine consumption (based on a measure of pure alcohol) noticeably increased from 2004 to 2010 (from 0.27 liters to 0.6 liters), and from 2007 to 2008, there was a 30% increase (from 0.4 to 0.52 liters)³.
- According to the Hong Kong Household Population Census for Health for 2003 to 2004, most, or 16.27%, of those who reportedly have started drinking under the age of 18 years belonged in the age group between 15-24 years old³.
- Binge drinkers are mainly young people. A comparison of those in different age groups showed the rate of binge drinking is the highest in males between 25 to 34 years, at around 15.6%, while in females most binge drinkers are in the age group between 18 to 24 years, at 4.6%³.

²⁰ Rehm, J et.al., *Lancet*. 2009 373:2230.

²¹ "Hong Kong Drinks the Most Wine in Asia." Wall Street Journal URL:

<http://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2012/03/13/hong-kong-drinks-the-most-wine-in-asia/> Accessed on 16 April 2012