

NIAAA Scientists Highlight Alcohol-Related Mortality Increase in the United States

By the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA)

A recent study by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) scientists found that nearly 1 million people died from alcohol-related causes between 1999 and 2017. The analysis of yearly death certificate data revealed that the number of death certificates mentioning alcohol more than doubled from 35,914 in 1999 to 72,558 in 2017, a year in which alcohol played a role in 2.6 percent of all deaths in the United States. In 2017, liver disease (31 percent; 22,245 deaths) and overdoses on alcohol alone or with other drugs (18 percent; 12,954 deaths) accounted for 35,199 deaths, nearly half of the alcohol-related deaths in that year. People ages 45 to 74 had the highest rates of deaths related to alcohol, but the biggest increases over time were among people ages 25 to 34.

“The high rates among middle-aged adults are consistent with previous reports of increases in ‘deaths of despair,’ generally defined as deaths related to overdoses, alcohol-associated liver cirrhosis, and suicides, primarily among non-Hispanic whites,” said first author Aaron White, Ph.D., Senior Scientific Advisor to the NIAAA Director. “However, in

the current study, alcohol-related deaths were increasing among people in almost all age and racial and ethnic groups by the end of the study period.”

Rates of death involving alcohol also increased more for women (85 percent increase) than men (35 percent increase) over the study period, further narrowing once-large differences in alcohol use and harms between males and females.

“The findings come at a time of growing evidence that even one drink per day of alcohol can contribute to an increase in the risk of breast cancer for women,” said senior author Patricia Powell, Ph.D. “Women also appear to be at a greater risk than men for alcohol-related cardiovascular diseases, liver disease, alcohol use disorder, and other consequences. Our findings underscore that alcohol is a growing women’s health issue.”

REFERENCE

White, A.; Castle, I.-J.P.; Hingson, R.; and Powell, P. Using death certificates to explore changes in alcohol-related mortality in the United States, 1999–2017. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 44:178–187, 2020. PMID: 31912524

