

Alcohol and smoking are key causes for bowel cancer

A new global study has found that lifestyle risk factors such as alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking are important risk factors for bowel cancer. Researchers have shown that people who consume the largest quantities of alcohol (equivalent to > 7 drinks per week) have 60% greater risk of developing the cancer, compared with non-drinkers.

Smoking, obesity and diabetes were also associated with a 20% greater risk of developing bowel cancer - the same risk linked with consuming high intakes of red and processed meat.

Approximately one million new cases of bowel (colorectal) cancer are diagnosed worldwide each year, and more than half a million people die from this type of cancer. In Australia alone, it is the most commonly occurring cancer with more than 12,000 new cases diagnosed each year.

According to lead researcher Associate Professor Rachel Huxley at The George Institute, the most startling finding of this study was, "The strong, and largely, unknown association between high intakes of alcoholic beverages with risk of colorectal cancer. Most people probably know that being overweight and having poor dietary habits are risk factors for the disease, but most are probably unaware that other lifestyle risk factors such as alcohol consumption, cigarette smoking and diabetes are also important culprits."

Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council recommend individuals shouldn't be drinking more than two standard drinks per day.

On a positive note, researchers also demonstrated that physical activity lowered an individual's risk of the disease but surprisingly, there was little evidence to indicate that high intakes of fruit and vegetables were protective against bowel cancer.

"These findings strongly suggest that a large proportion of colorectal cancer cases could potentially be avoided by making relatively modest lifestyle adjustments such as drinking less, quitting smoking, eating healthily and being a little more active", said Associate Professor Huxley. "Such changes would also have huge benefits in terms of reducing an individuals' risk of developing other major forms of illness including cardiovascular disease."

The study reviewed more than 100 published studies that had reported on the association between major and modifiable risk factors for colorectal cancer including alcohol, smoking, diabetes, physical activity and various dietary components.

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Notes:

- The George Institute for International Health is an internationally-recognised health research organisation, undertaking high impact research across a broad health landscape. It is a leader in the clinical trials, health policy and capacity-building areas. The Institute has a global network of top medical experts in a

range of research fields as well as expertise in research design, project management and data and statistical analysis. With a respected voice among global policy makers, The Institute has attracted significant funding support from governments, philanthropic organisations and corporations. George Institute research is regularly published in the top tier of academic journals internationally.

- Reference: Parkin DM, Bray F, Ferlay J, et al. Global cancer statistics, 2002. *CA Cancer J Clin* 2005;55:74-108.
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