# The burden of chronic disease in Australia demands a national alcohol public awareness campaign

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### Prevention of disease is far preferable to treatment in every measure.

Do you know that alcohol causes up to six per cent of breast cancers in Australian women? That it can lead to heart disease and stroke? That alcohol is implicated in colo-rectal cancer and cancers of the head, neck and throat?

If not, you aren’t alone. Awareness of the link between these diseases and long-term use of alcohol products is low, with only 16 per cent of Australians knowing that alcohol can cause breast cancer in women. Slightly more, 29 per cent, are aware of the link between alcohol and throat cancer and less than half, 41 per cent, know that alcohol use can lead to stroke.

Yet, the vast majority – four in five of us - believe we have the right to know about long-term harm associated with regular alcohol use. And so we should.

The alcohol industry are not so keen for us to know these risks. For decades they have [kept Australians in the dark](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/dar.12596) about the serious health risks from drinking, despite the significant harm that alcohol products cause to individuals, families and the economy.

An alcohol industry representative recently described alcohol as an ‘intrinsic’ part of Australian society. Intrinsic means essential or belonging naturally. This wily claim may as well have been an accusation that Australian communities can’t survive without the necessity of alcohol use – this is patently untrue.

Alcohol is intrinsic to alcohol-fueled violence, accident and injury. It is intrinsic to a huge burden of alcohol-related disease suffered by Australian families. And it is of course intrinsic to alcohol industry profits. Thanks to the largely unfettered availability of alcohol products and big-budget advertising campaigns, alcohol is a normalised – but far from intrinsic part of Australian society.

Total alcohol consumption in Australia is currently declining. However this trend, often spouted by alcohol producers and marketers trying to protect their interests, masks the harsh truth that alcohol use continues to inflict serious harm. In fact a recent [Australian-first study](https://www1.racgp.org.au/newsgp/clinical/alcohol-tops-study-ranking-drug-harms-in-australia) has shown that alcohol causes more harm to individuals and society than 22 other drugs – legal and illicit. Alcohol is ranked as the most damaging drug overall to individuals and others, a product of the impact of deaths, disease, injuries, family adversity and the economic costs of these harms.

Of particular concern is the impact of alcohol on long-term health, and its contribution to the current epidemic of chronic disease. A known human carcinogen, alcohol is a risk factor for stroke, heart disease, a number of different cancers, mental health disorders and obesity. There is increasing evidence of its association with dementia. Alcohol affects nearly every organ in the body, even at moderate and low levels of consumption, and is implicated in over sixty different medical diagnoses. A [major study](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736%2818%2931571-X/fulltext) in 2018 confirmed that there is no level of alcohol consumption that improves health.

Yet Australians remain largely unaware of these health risks and this knowledge deficit shapes each person’s beliefs and attitudes about alcohol and, consequently, their consumption behaviour. Not only is there a lack of awareness of the risks, there is a lack of knowledge of safe drinking levels.

Many of those who identify as ‘responsible’ drinkers (87% of drinkers in [FARE’s 2019 Alcohol Poll](https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/FARE-Annual-Alcohol-Poll-2019-FINAL.pdf)) likely believe they are not at risk. But drinking within Australia’s national [Guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-guidelines-reduce-health-risks-drinking-alcohol) does not mean there is no risk of experiencing alcohol-caused disease or harm. Put simply, the more you drink over your lifetime, the higher your cumulative risk of dying from alcohol-related disease or injury.

Despite the obvious need, there has never been a national campaign to raise awareness of these serious long-term health harms caused by regular consumption of alcohol. Where they do exist they tend to target the vulnerable groups such as youth drinking.

Public awareness campaigns are important because they have been shown to be effective in raising awareness and increasing motivation to enact lifestyle changes – as well as having the ability to reach a very large audience at low cost.

Successful public health campaigns in Australia include sun-protection (*Slip! Slop! Slap!*), smoking cessation (*Every cigarette is doing you damage*) and immunisation (the Measles Control Campaign). And we now have strong and [recent evidence](https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/3/e006511), such as West Australia’s [*Alcohol.Think Again*](https://alcoholthinkagain.com.au/), showing how to [design](https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/7/4/e014193) and implement public health awareness campaigns for maximum effectiveness.

The future incidence of alcohol-related chronic disease can be limited by enabling individuals to reduce their alcohol intake by making better decisions about how much and how often they drink. This would be aided by providing the information people need to make these decisions.

Prevention of disease is far preferable to treatment in every measure. A substantial national awareness campaign on the health implications of long-term alcohol use will help prevent chronic disease and redress the massive imbalance between misleading advertising by alcohol companies and public health messages that increase the ability of people to make better decisions about their health.

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