

*Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™* Column

Alcohol and Cancer Link Officially Recognized

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You may have noticed that alcohol has been in the news a lot recently, as more and more research is showing exactly how damaging it can be to your health. And with the increase of social activities that involve drinking, even ostensibly health ones like 5k runs or yoga classes, it's more important than ever to know the risks.

We've all heard of the connection between alcohol and liver damage and the dangers of drinking and driving. And most of us may have heard of connections between alcohol and memory issues, disturbed sleep, interpersonal violence and the dangers of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. But something new, probably for the majority, is the increasingly emerging data on the connection between alcohol and cancer. In fact, the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) has, this year, joined many other national and international [health] organizations, in officially recognizing alcohol as an established risk factor for several types of cancer, including mouth, throat, esophageal, liver, colorectal and breast cancer.

In addition, they have stated that alcohol consumption is a "potentially modifiable risk factor for cancer," meaning that, similar to smoking and wearing sunscreen, it is a risk factor that can be minimized. To this end, they have made a number of recommendations on how we can decrease excessive exposure to alcohol and, thus, lower the instance of alcohol-caused cancers in the United States. First, and most obviously, the best way to reduce personal risk is to reduce personal alcohol consumption. The CDC's guidelines recommend no more than one drink per day for women or two drinks for men. Additionally, if you are under 21, pregnant or trying to become so, or have health conditions that could be worsened by alcohol, you should not drink alcohol at all. Some more environmental suggestions, that would address the problem on a greater scale, include increasing alcohol taxes, reducing the number of locations that sell alcohol, avoiding privatization of alcohol sales and further restricting the market to youth. This is particularly important because the earlier youth start drinking, the greater their chances of developing alcohol dependencies and, with this new information, the greater their chances of getting cancer.

As a specific example of a policy and environmental change that ASCO and others propose is the elimination of "pinkwashing." Pinkwashing is the type of marketing that uses the color pink and/or pink ribbons to show commitment to finding a cure for breast cancer. Essentially, this means that companies and businesses are using the angle of cancer research and prevention to promote their own products and increase their own profits. Given the overwhelming evidence of the link between alcohol and breast cancer, when this strategy is used by any group or company that makes money from the sales of alcoholic beverages, it is at best disingenuous and at worst, downright harmful.

And this brings us back to the ever more common inclusion of alcohol in "healthy" events mentioned at the start. So many of these events are using alcohol as a draw to bring in more customers or press, which completely ignores the related health risks associated with alcohol consumption. It is important that, especially for events or companies planning to make money off the sale of these beverages, that they be transparent about the personal benefits they get from partnering with alcohol companies. They need to be including information about the health risks associated with alcohol consumption, especially

the relationship between alcohol and cancer, since it is so under-acknowledged and the “search for a cure” is so often used as a marketing tool for selling alcohol.