



# The propaganda of the alcohol industry also reaches the general practice

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**Moderate alcohol consumption lowers the risk of all cause mortality, according to the Dutch Beer Institute. This organisation paid by brewers distributes results from outdated research. For healthcare staff, the institute offers free medical training in which alcohol use is framed in a favorable way. The official accreditation for the course has been revoked following inquiries from Follow the Money.**

Summary of this article in one minute:

- The J-curve, the 'hockey stick' that symbolizes the fact that moderate drinkers live longer than non-drinkers, is really out of favor, according to top scientists. But it is still cited by the alcohol industry.
- Two exam questions from an online course for healthcare personnel are about the hobbyhorses of the alcohol industry: the J-curve is still valid and the Netherlands has one of the strictest alcohol guidelines in Europe.
- Following questions from Follow the Money, the online course is no longer offered by four professional associations and the accreditation has been partially withdrawn. The latter mainly because of financing by the alcohol industry and not so much because of the content.
- The highly outdated information on the website [alcoholrichtlijn.nl](#) (alcoholguideline) was also used in 2018 by the industry in the negotiations on the National Prevention Agreement (Nationaal Preventieakkoord).

A slender woman throws her head back, her arms high in the air. She is in the heart of a 'talking plate' (1) that you can order for free from the Dutch Beer Institute (2). The cheerful placemat lists all kinds of benefits of moderate alcohol consumption: it can fit into a healthy lifestyle and reduce the risk of premature death, and did you already know that moderate drinking reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and dementia? In addition to healthy products such as broccoli, lettuce and fruit, a large glass of beer is depicted, flanked by the text: *Moderate beer consumption can fit into a moderate diet*. Cheers, to your health!

Unfortunately, the information on the website of the Dutch Beer Institute is incorrect. More and more studies show that even small amounts of alcohol can have a negative effect on health. For example, the risk of breast cancer increases with a glass a day (3).

In 2015, the Dutch Health Council led the way in Europe by adjusting the alcohol guideline to 'Do not drink alcohol and if you drink, then a maximum of one glass a day' (4). In 2021, 46 percent of the population said they adhered to this standard (5). The label of the Knowledge Institute Beer lists two glasses for moderate alcohol consumption for men: that goes against the advice of the Health Council.

## ***'No top scientist dares to claim that moderate alcohol consumption has health benefits'***

### **Negative effect already with one glass a day**

'There is no top scientist who still dares to claim that moderate alcohol consumption has health benefits.' Professor of psychiatry René Kahn wrote the book *Op je gezondheid?* (To your health?) (6) and was a member of the Health Council when the Dutch alcohol guideline was adjusted.

'In 2015, there was still discussion about a possible positive effect of moderate alcohol consumption,' says Kahn. 'But we are now seven years later, and that discussion is really closed. The consequences of drinking a glass a day aren't huge, but the alcohol industry shouldn't pretend it's healthy. A study (7) published in the renowned journal *The Lancet* shows that there is no safe dose of alcohol when you consider all cause mortality. The risks already increase from zero glasses on premature death, on cancer, and on accidents.'

Another study (8) in *The Lancet*, which the industry likes to refer to, shows that small amounts of alcohol increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, except for a heart attack. This study shows that people who drink 100 grams of alcohol per week, or ten units, have the lowest risk of all cause mortality.

According to Kahn, that image is incorrect and that effect is not due to alcohol, but to the healthy lifestyle of people who consume little alcohol. 'People who drink a beer a day are very disciplined and take good care of their health. If you leave sick people, people who use drugs and ex-drinkers out of the group non-drinkers, there is a linear relationship between alcohol consumption and total mortality. All in all, drinking alcohol does not provide any health benefits.'

## ***The belief in the positive effects of moderate alcohol consumption is one of the spearheads of the industry***

Like Kahn, professor of nutrition Martijn Katan says that the relationship between alcohol consumption and health damage is linear: the more you drink, the greater the damage. He points out that if a positive effect of moderate alcohol consumption is found in scientific research, it usually concerns epidemiological (9) research. An attempt is made to correct for confounding factors, but according to Katan that does not actually work (10). 'The researchers of the second study in *The Lancet* also partly admit that.' That is reason to be suspicious of the results.

## **The myth of the J curve**

Yet many people still believe that drinking a little alcohol is healthy. According to the alcohol knowledge monitor (11), no less than 38.5 percent of people think that drinking two glasses of red wine a day is healthy. And that is not surprising, because it is one of the spearheads of the alcohol industry to hammer in this belief.

Both the Dutch Beer Institute and the Foundation for Responsible Alcohol Consumption (12) like to use the J-curve (13) in their information, a graph in the form of a hockey stick that shows a positive effect of moderate alcohol consumption. According to the curve, people who drink a glass of alcohol per day achieve health gains if you compare them with people who do not drink or drink excessively. In addition, the graph on their websites shows that men who drink up to four and women who drink up to two units are said to have a lower risk of premature death. The graph is based on research dating from 2006.

At the moment, according to independent scientists, moderate drinking only reduces the risk of diabetes type 2 and a heart attack. But it cannot be said with certainty whether that effect can be attributed to alcohol.

In addition to Martijn Katan and René Kahn, we spoke to a third top scientist who believes that the J-curve is outdated. Onno van Schayck, professor of preventive health care at Maastricht University, also sees little reason to stick to the curve. 'If you put all the studies together, the risk of death from cardiovascular disease increases especially when more than one alcoholic drink is consumed per day. The second publication of *The Lancet* confirms this, except for heart attacks. Also on the basis of this publication there is no reason to assume that the J-curve for alcohol damage is correct. There can be many causes for this, including underreporting bias (14), which this publication also points to.'

***'If you put all the studies together, the risk of death from cardiovascular disease increases especially when more than one alcoholic drink per day is drunk.'***

With the reference to the outdated picture of the J-curve, the Dutch Beer Institute is cherry-picking. It presents itself as 'the scientific institute for responsible beer consumption and health'. While the Dutch Brewers (15) are the main funder of this institute and the website only cites studies into moderate alcohol consumption.

In an update of the first international study (16) by *The Lancet*, which appeared on July 16, the researchers concluded that alcohol consumption among young people is almost always harmful. In healthy people over 40 there may be a protective effect of up to 1.87 units of alcohol for some heart

diseases and diabetes. But that research is more of the same, Katan thinks. 'The new paper has the same built-in weaknesses as all observational studies of alcohol and health,' he says.

## Industry training

The Dutch Beer Institute offers the free online course 'Alcohol and Health' (17), which was accredited (18) by four professional associations. Dieticians, practice nurses of general practitioners, diabetes nurses and weight consultants could earn five accreditation points for successfully completing this training. Following questions from Follow the Money, the course can no longer be followed through these professional associations.

The J-curve takes a prominent place in the online course. One of the twenty exam questions is the statement: 'The so-called J-curve that illustrates the link between alcohol consumption and premature death is now outdated'. The correct answer is 'yes', but in the course you have to answer 'no'.



A 2006 study (19) by Augusto Di Castelnuovo is cited as scientific basis. In the study, Di Castelnuovo comes to the conclusion that men who drink up to four glasses a day and women who drink up to two glasses of alcohol a day have a lower risk of death. It is logical that the beer brewers would like to see this message spread as much as possible. Because in 2020, the Netherlands was the second largest beer exporter in the world (20). In that year, 22 million hectoliters of beer were brewed in the Netherlands, half of which was destined for export.

Di Castelnuovo came up with an update (21) last year in which he cleaned up the group of non-drinkers. That study now only concerned a lower risk of death at 5 grams of alcohol per day, half a unit: 50 milliliters of wine, 125 milliliters of beer or 17.5 milliliters of strong liquor. If this is indeed the case, then the question is: who drinks half a glass a day? In restaurants and bars it is common to serve 5 to 6 glasses from a bottle of wine, that is 125 to 150 milliliters per glass. That's three times as much. At home, people also often pour much larger units.

This study also states that Di Castelnuovo received money in 2014 from the Dutch Beer Institute as a member of the organization of the seventh European Beer and Health Symposium, a party of European beer brewers. A fellow researcher acted as a speaker at a more recent edition of that symposium.

## Don't drink or one glass at the most

Another exam question in the course is about the alcohol guideline. Statement: The Netherlands has one of the strictest alcohol guidelines in Europe (22). That's right, and that's a thorn in the side of the alcohol industry. According to former Health Council member René Kahn, the Netherlands led the way in 2015 by advising not to drink alcohol. In 2016, the UK lowered the standard for men from 21 to 14 drinks a week.

Since then, several leading studies have been published that state that the standard for responsible alcohol consumption should be lowered. Even Di Castelnuovo, who thus has ties to the alcohol industry, acknowledges that a lower mortality rate is only achieved with lower amounts of alcohol than in many guidelines. In many countries, that guideline is two units of alcohol per day for men and one per day for women.

Those who complete the course will learn that the Netherlands has one of the strictest alcohol guidelines in Europe and that you live longer if you drink alcohol moderately. Exactly the messages that STIVA and the Dutch Beer Institute have been repeating for years. It is a conclusion that the course is slowly working towards. The material and the questions thus provide an overly positive idea about alcohol consumption, with 'facts' that are pleasing to the industry.

## **Accreditation withdrawn**

After questions from Follow the Money, two of the four professional associations withdrew the accreditation for the course of the Dutch Beer Institute. A third professional association is considering this. A fourth, the Professional Association of Weight Consultants in the Netherlands (23), has put the course on hold.

One of the professional associations that has withdrawn its accreditation is the ADAP: Accreditation for Expertise-promoting Activities Paramedics (24). About 2,700 applications for accreditation pass through here every year. Training providers must agree to the conditions for accreditation. One of the conditions is that there is no (appearance of) conflict of interest in the financing of the course. With the application of the Dutch Beer Institute for the accreditation of the course for dietitians, the Dutch Beer Institute has signed these conditions.

A total of 36 dietitians followed the ADAP-recognized course. They have been informed about the expired accreditation. The institute believes that any semblance of a conflict of interest between the Dutch Beer Institute with the beer breweries on the one hand and science on the other can be harmful, even unintentionally. In addition, ADAP finds that the course contains 'subtle features of possible framing by stating that moderate alcohol consumption is part of a healthy lifestyle'. ADAP will evaluate the incident to prevent a recurrence.

***'Nowhere will you find or will you find that we pretend to provide independent information'***

The professional association of carers and nurses (25) also has difficulty with financing from the alcohol industry. 'The initiator has provided incorrect information about the financing of the course. That was the reason for us to withdraw the accreditation. In the first instance, the initiator must provide correct information, but we must also check it properly ourselves. This request has slipped through the cracks. In the future, we will check applications from these types of providers extra,' says a spokesperson. This is already standard practice for providers of courses on the use of medicines and medical aids. The 5 points of the four practice nurses who have followed the course are withdrawn, but they have to obtain a total of 5 further training points less because it was a mistake by the professional association.

## RESEARCH ON THE INFLUENCE OF INDUSTRY ON ALCOHOL PREVENTION POLICY

Alcohol use is the second preventable cause of death after smoking. Strict rules now apply to tobacco use in the Netherlands. For example, there is a ban on advertising, tobacco is increasingly difficult to obtain and there are high excise duties. This is much less the case with alcohol. This Follow the Money research focuses on why.

The first article (26) in the series was about the influence of the alcohol industry on the realization of the sub-agreement 'problematic alcohol use' of the National Prevention Agreement.

For this second article, the course content has been submitted to independent scientists. The statements on the websites of the alcohol industry were also examined by independent scientists. Dozens of studies into the consequences of (moderate) alcohol use have also been examined.

The following article discusses the nexus between science and the alcohol industry. Among other things, it concerns the question of which scientists do research that is paid for by the alcohol industry.

A website of the alcohol industry that also contains very outdated information is alcoholguideline.nl. If you search for alcohol guideline on Google, it is the third suggestion. It is a STIVA campaign. The website was created to sow confusion (27) about the Health Council's 2015 advice not to drink alcohol and if you drink, a maximum of one glass a day. According to STIVA, the substantiation of that advice from the Health Council is not good. The alcohol industry itself cites two documents in its plea: criticism from an international forum of self-selected scientists and an article by Aafje Sierksma and Henk Hendriks, alcohol researcher at The Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research (28) who also advises STIVA and Heineken.

In addition to building the website, STIVA sent the criticism from the panel of scientists and the views of scientists affiliated with the alcohol industry to the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport in an effort to get the alcohol guideline amended. Pim van Gool, chairman of the Health Council at the time, wrote in a response (29) that he regarded this working method as 'unbecoming and unsound in a scientific sense'. The alcohol guideline was not amended.

When we asked STIVA whether the outdated information on the alcoholguideline.nl website provides a fair picture, director Peter de Wolf answers: 'We use and refer to the publications of the Health Council. At the same time, I agree with you that we are now six years further and that the context in which we have created this website has changed. [...] I therefore also think that we are going to take this website offline. Quite frankly, we were not busy with the existence of this website on a daily basis and it is not our priority now.' The homepage now reports: This website is temporarily unavailable.

### **National Prevention Agreement adjusted**

The article by Sierksma and Hendriks was submitted in 2018 by the Dutch brewers during the discussions on the National Prevention Agreement, which was signed by 70 parties on 23 November 2018. Representatives from the alcohol industry and health organizations have negotiated with each other for six months to reach the sub-agreement on 'problematic alcohol use'.

Cees-Jan Adema, at the time foreman of the Nederlandse Brouwers, wanted a text in the prevention agreement about the alcohol guideline to be amended. Documents retrieved by using the open government law (30) show that the original text was: 'Alcohol use is associated with more than 200 diseases. Studies show that there is no safe lower limit for alcohol consumption for some of these diseases, an example of which is breast cancer. Based on this, the Health Council has been advising since 2016 not to drink more than one glass a day, in order to prevent chronic diseases'.

Adema e-mailed a text proposal to the participants of the alcohol table (31) with the article by Sierksma and Hendriks as attachment: 'Based on the 2015 Guidelines for a Good Diet, it appears that moderate alcohol consumption shows both favorable and unfavorable links with the top 10 diseases in the Netherlands. The favorable ones relate to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes mellitus and dementia.'



Rob Bovens of the Positive Lifestyle Foundation (32), participant of the alcohol table, calls it 'unacceptable' in an email (33) to other health organizations that the alcohol producers set aside studies of the level of *The Lancet* and introduce their own propaganda. 'These involved thorough studies, based on data from 600,000 participants, supplied, discussed and reviewed by dozens of renowned scientists. The next step was to question the Health Council's advice based on the response of a single scientist, affiliated with an institute commissioned by the industry. And then use that as an argument not to mention the content of the advice of the GR [Health Council, ed.] in the agreement because there would be discussion about it,' Bovens writes. He adds that he assumes that the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport will not adopt Adema's text.

However, the documents show that the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport does indeed submit the text of Adema to the Health Council. The beer brewers partly get their way with regard to the text in the National Prevention Agreement: 'With one glass a day, they [the Health Council, ed.] see both favorable and unfavorable links with diseases. The favorable associations relate to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease. Unfavorably, drinking one glass a day in women is associated with a higher risk of breast cancer'.

## 'Insane'

The Health Council now says it has only had an advisory role. 'The contribution of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport in the negotiations for the National Prevention Agreement is entirely at the expense of the Ministry itself.' The Ministry says that it has tried to formulate as carefully as possible. 'All parties participating in the table on problematic alcohol use had a say in this process, the National Prevention Agreement is the result of those discussions.'

The text adjustment is not an incident. Because when the National Prevention Agreement was drawn up, the word 'excise increase' disappeared from the draft version, as was apparent from the first article (34) in this series. The alcohol industry has a permanent say in the prevention policy, because it now participates in discussions at the alcohol table twice a year. Several health organizations are

considering withdrawing from the consultation because they do not want to sit down with the alcohol industry.

## "Market forces destroy more than you like"

So the outdated messages of the alcohol industry aren't just tucked away on websites that no one visits. They are actively used by the alcohol lobby in an attempt to prevent a stricter prevention policy. Professor Kahn thinks it's a bad thing that outdated insights are being cited by the alcohol industry. 'It is their right to try to influence public opinion. But it is important that they do so on the basis of objective and the most recent information. This is not possible with selective information. The potentially small positive health effects such as a lower risk of a heart attack are negated by a higher risk of cancer. On balance, the bottom line is: the more you drink, the more damage to your health.'

The main messages are also processed in training material for healthcare staff, to the dismay of professor Katan. 'Nurses and medical assistants need to learn about the effect of beer and wine on health. And we let the beer industry provide education about this? Insane. These are the disastrous consequences of transferring government tasks to the market. Market forces destroy more than you would like.'

1. <https://www.kennisinstituutbier.nl/product/praatplaten-bier-en-gezondheid>
2. The Dutch Beer Institute ([Kennisinstituut Bier](#)) has been in existence since 2009 and has the Dutch Brewers (Nederlandse Brouwers) as its main financier. The aim, in their own words, is 'to inform about the positive health effects of responsible beer consumption'. 80 percent of the annual budget of approximately 300,000 euros is spent on staff and office costs.
3. <https://expertisecentrumalcohol.trimbos.nl/items/details/alcohol-en-kanker>
4. By a glass, the Health Council means one unit of alcohol (10 grams of pure alcohol): 250ml beer, 100ml wine or 17.5ml of strong liquor.
5. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/maatwerk/2022/23/richtlijn-alcoholgebruik-en-zwaar-overmatig-drinken-2021-18-jaar-of-ouder>
6. <https://www.uitgeverijbalans.nl/boeken/op-je-gezondheid/>
7. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31310-2/fulltext#seccestitle200](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31310-2/fulltext#seccestitle200)
8. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)30134-X/fulltext#seccestitle130](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)30134-X/fulltext#seccestitle130)
9. Epidemiological research is observational research among (large) population groups. This means that what is happening is being observed without intervening. This is in contrast to experimental research, for example in a laboratory. Epidemiological research requires large numbers and repeated findings before conclusions can be drawn about a specific risk factor.
10. <https://www.ntvg.nl/artikelen/het-probleem-met-de-voedingsepidemiologie>
11. <https://www.trimbos.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/AF1883-Kennismonitor-Alcohol-2020.pdf>
12. Stichting Verantwoorde Alcoholconsumptie ([STIVA](#)) is a partnership between Dutch producers and importers of beer, wine and spirits. STIVA implements the Advertising Code for Alcoholic Beverages (RVA) and is behind campaigns such as 'Enjoy, but drink in moderation'. The STIVA likes to emphasize what is already going well.
13. <https://www.kennisinstituutbier.nl/verantwoorde-alcoholconsumptie>

14. People often can't estimate how much they drink. In addition, a well-known phenomenon in scientific research is that respondents are inclined to give socially or socially desirable answers. In measurements of alcohol consumption, researchers try to correct the results for this phenomenon. With regard to alcohol use in particular, it is known that respondents drink on average half more than they indicate.
15. The Dutch Brewers ([Nederlandse Brouwers](#)) represent 95 percent of the Dutch beer producers.
16. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(22\)00847-9/fulltext#seccesstitle150](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(22)00847-9/fulltext#seccesstitle150)
17. <https://www.kennisinstituutbier.nl/node/7767>
18. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220327034043/https://www.kennisinstituutbier.nl/content/hoera-accreditatie-voor-onze-gratis-e-learning-over-alcohol-en-gezondheid>
19. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/769554>
20. <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2021/29/nederland-grootste-bierexporteur-in-de-europese-unie>
21. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/add.15593>
22. <https://www.kennisinstituutbier.nl/verantwoorde-alcoholconsumptie>
23. Beroepsvereniging Gewichtsconsulenten Nederland ([BGN](#))
24. Accreditatie Deskundigheidsbevorderende Activiteiten Paramedici ([ADAP](#))
25. With 105,000 members, Beroepsvereniging Verzorgenden en Verpleegkundigen ([V&VN](#)) is the largest professional association in the Netherlands. V&VN provides accreditation for nurses, carers and nursing specialists.
26. <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/alcohol-van-het-kabinet-mogen-we-lekker-doorzuipen?share=b8jA4Qv7H%2F9INs%2BKhxqlip2Yechh60QXmKe4AF0UT7WCcgKlXvjLDGgPITVEBfg%3D>
27. The website opens with the text: Towards a clear alcohol guideline; one without scientific doubt.
28. [De Nederlandse Organisatie voor toegepast-natuurwetenschappelijk onderzoek \(TNO\)](#)
29. <https://www.gezondheidsraad.nl/documenten/brieven/2016/03/10/brief-aan-staatssecretaris-wvs-over-alcoholrichtlijn-advies-richtlijnen-goede-voeding-2015>
30. Wet Openbaarheid van Bestuur (WOB) currently [Wet Open Overheid](#).
31. 31 representatives from the alcohol industry and health organizations have negotiated with each other for six months to reach the [sub-agreement](#) on 'problematic alcohol use', part of the National Prevention Agreement.
32. [Stichting Positieve Lijfstijl](#).
33. This email is in FTM's possession.
34. <https://www.ftm.nl/artikelen/alcohol-van-het-kabinet-mogen-we-lekker-doorzuipen?share=MKWP9qTkr015Hf32iP00JwJG66HHGFUflw0LSsCEoDtLcUMKSZFBun1fJwu16VQ%3D>