
SAFER: Preventing and Reducing Alcohol-Related Harms

Harmful use of alcohol: a health and development priority

Worldwide, more than 3 million deaths every year result from the harmful use of alcohol. In addition, 5.1% of the global burden of disease and injury is attributable to alcohol (as measured in disability adjusted life years) ^[1]. Alcohol consumption causes death and disability relatively early in life: 13.5% of deaths among those 20-39 years can be attributed to alcohol, reducing the capacities of an economically productive cohort ^[1]. The harmful use of alcohol is a major obstacle to sustainable development in all countries. It has an adverse impact on the health and well-being of the alcohol users and their friends, family, colleagues and communities, and it damages the social fabric and economic development of societies. The harmful use of alcohol is also a causal factor in more than 200 disease and injury conditions, affecting maternal health and child development, noncommunicable diseases including cancer and cardiovascular diseases, injuries, violence, mental health, and infectious diseases such as TB and HIV/AIDS ^[1].

In recognition of this, global leadership has made tackling the harmful use of alcohol a priority. The harmful use of alcohol is emphasized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ^[2]. Political commitments were made at the NCD high-level meetings of the General Assembly in 2011 and 2014, at the World Health Assembly through the 2010 WHO Global strategy to reduce the harmful use of alcohol (the global alcohol strategy) ^[3], and in the WHO global action plan for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases 2013–2020 (the global NCD action plan) ^[4] with the 2017 update of its Appendix 3 “best buys” ^[5]. These, as well as other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of alcohol related harm, further underline the broad political support for actions at all levels.

References

1. *Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health 2018*. 2018, World Health Organization: Geneva, Switzerland.
2. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. 2015, United Nations.
3. *Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol*. 2010, World Health Organization.
4. *Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013-2020*. 2013, World Health Organization: Geneva, Switzerland.
5. *Appendix 3 of the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013-2020*. 2017, World Health Organization: Geneva, Switzerland

SAFER

SAFER has been developed to meet global, regional and country health and development goals, and to reduce human suffering and pain caused by the harmful use of alcohol.

The overall objective of the SAFER initiative is to provide support for Member States in reducing the harmful use of alcohol by boosting and enhancing the ongoing implementation of the global alcohol strategy and other WHO and UN instruments. SAFER will focus on the most cost-effective priority interventions (“best buys”) using a set of WHO tools and resources to prevent and reduce alcohol-related harm ^[5].

SAFER consists of multiple interrelated components:

- A WHO-led package of technical guidance on effective policy and program interventions;
- A WHO/UN-led operational programme focusing on country action;
- A multi-stakeholder communication and advocacy campaign; and
- A SAFER monitoring and surveillance system as part of the regular monitoring and surveillance systems in WHO.

Following the successful example of MPOWER for tobacco control and other WHO technical packages such as SHAKE, SAVE LIVES, and HEARTS, SAFER provides action-oriented guidance for country-level implementation with a small number of high-impact interventions.

While SAFER will benefit all countries, country-level operations will focus on low- and middle-income countries, especially those with a high burden of harmful use of alcohol.

The technical package, operational programme and communication and advocacy campaign will focus on the five WHO “best buys” for reducing harmful use of alcohol:

S trengthen restrictions on alcohol availability	Enacting and enforcing restrictions on commercial or public availability of alcohol through laws, policies and programmes are important ways to reduce harmful use of alcohol. Such strategies provide essential measures to prevent easy access to alcohol by young people and other vulnerable and high-risk groups.
A dvance and enforce drink driving counter-measures	Road users who are impaired by alcohol have a significantly higher risk of being involved in a crash. Enacting and enforcing strong drink-driving laws and low blood alcohol concentration limits via sobriety checkpoints and random breath testing will help to turn the tide.
F acilitate access to screening, brief interventions and treatment	Health professionals have an important role in helping people to reduce or stop their drinking to reduce health risks, and health services have to provide effective interventions for those in need of help and their families.
E nforce bans or comprehensive restrictions on alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotion	Bans and comprehensive restrictions on alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotion are impactful and cost-effective measures to prevent and reduce alcohol harm. Enacting and enforcing bans or comprehensive restrictions on exposure to alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotion in the digital world will bring public health benefits and help protect children, adolescents and abstainers from the pressure to start consuming alcohol.
R aise prices on alcohol through excise taxes, and pricing policies	Alcohol taxation and pricing policies are among the most effective and cost-effective alcohol control measures. An increase in excise taxes on alcoholic beverages is a proven measure to reduce harmful use of alcohol. It provides governments revenue to offset the economic costs of harmful use of alcohol.

Three key principles will drive the SAFER initiative forward: implement, monitor, and protect.

1. Advocacy, resource mobilization, technical capacity building and programmatic action at country level are key components in the implementation of SAFER.
 2. SAFER implementation must be supported by strong monitoring systems, to enable accountability and progress tracking. Such systems, at the country level, should include monitoring of sales, consumption, health and social harms, economic impact, and industry practices. WHO will incorporate SAFER monitoring into its global monitoring and surveillance system.
 3. SAFER will support countries by ensuring that alcohol control measures are guided, formulated and implemented by public health interests and as such are protected from industry interference and commercial interests.
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The SAFER Initiative

Action Package

S
Strengthen restrictions on alcohol availability

A
Advance and enforce drink driving counter measures

F
Facilitate access to screening, brief interventions and treatment

E
Enforce bans/comprehensive restrictions on alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotion

R
Raise prices on alcohol through excise taxes and pricing policies

National Action

Implement
Strong political will, adequate resources, and technical and institutional capacity are critical to enacting the SAFER interventions at the country level.

Monitor
Strong monitoring systems must support SAFER implementation to enable accountability and track progress.

Protect
Alcohol control measures must be guided and formulated by public health interests and protected from industry interference and commercial interests.

Global Support

WHO Technical Guidance

- Technical note
- Policy briefs
- Factsheets
- Implementation toolkits
- Monitoring framework
- Guidance on protection from industry interference

WHO/UN Joint Programme

- Capacity building
- Support networks
- Technical support

Communication and Advocacy

- Partnerships
- SAFER events
- Resource mobilization
- SAFER initiative visibility