

Alcohol and Breast Cancer

Introduction

Breakthrough Breast Cancer is the UK's leading breast cancer charity and is committed to fighting breast cancer through research and awareness. Currently, 1 in 9 women in the UK will develop breast cancer at some point in their lifetime. The incidence of breast cancer has continued its upward trend in the UK, increasing by 70% since 1971.

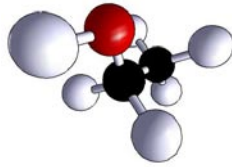
The AERC is funding the publication of Breakthrough's Risk Factor Fact Sheet for Alcohol. The fact sheet aims to increase awareness among women of the emerging link between regular alcohol consumption and breast cancer.

Findings

Recent evidence from epidemiological studies has demonstrated an association between alcohol consumption and breast cancer risk. An estimated 4% of breast cancers are now thought to be in part attributable to alcohol consumption in developed countries, contributing to an estimated 2,000 cases of breast cancer in the UK each year.

The Collaborative Group on Hormone Risk Factors for Breast Cancer, in 2002, re-analysed the results of 53 epidemiological studies on breast cancer and alcohol. The group reported that drinking, on average, one unit of alcohol per day increases a woman's risk of breast cancer by about 6%. This risk increases by a further 6% for each additional unit of alcohol consumed on a daily basis. Individual studies, published after this data collection, are in general agreement with these conclusions. Current evidence also suggests that the association between alcohol and breast cancer risk is observed regardless of the type of alcoholic drink consumed¹.

How alcohol increases the risk of breast cancer has not been clearly identified. Alcohol may change circulating concentrations of sex hormones, in particular oestrogen, suggesting a similar mechanism to other known breast cancer risk factors. However, much more research is needed to confirm this relationship. Animal and cell studies have also provided limited evidence for a number of other plausible biological mechanisms.²



The link between alcohol and breast cancer has become increasingly alarming considering the backdrop of increased alcohol consumption among young women in the UK. Figures from the *Health Survey for England*, carried out by the National Centre for Social Research in 2002, reported that 32% of young women between 16-24 years drank more than 14 units per week. Since 1998, the proportion of young women drinking 6 or more units on one day in a week has increased from 38% in 1998 to 52% in 2002. If such drinking trends continue among young women, it is expected that the incidence of breast cancer will increase accordingly.

Implications

The Breakthrough Risk Factor Fact Sheet for Alcohol will form part of a series of fact sheets specific to established scientific risk factors for breast cancer, including the contraceptive pill, Hormone Replacement Therapy and familial history of breast cancer. The alcohol fact sheet will include evidence drawn from recent scientific studies and provide advice on the recommended levels of alcohol consumption for women.

Breakthrough hopes that by publishing information and advice on breast cancer risk factor, we could potentially reduce the incidence of this disease that still claims over 1,000 women's lives in the UK every month.

Further Information

Enquiries about this project should be addressed to: The Policy Team at Breakthrough Breast Cancer info@breakthrough.org.uk (0207 025 2400)

ALCOHOL INSIGHTS Alcohol Insights are brief summaries of the findings made from research or development grants. They may be copied and used without permission provided that the source is attributed to the AERC.

Further information about Alcohol Insights can be found at www.aerc.org.uk or email: info@aerc.org.uk

(Footnotes)

¹ Collaborative Group on Hormonal Factors in Breast Cancer. (2002) Alcohol, tobacco and breast cancer - collaborative reanalysis of individual data from 53 epidemiological studies, including 58,515 women with breast cancer and 95,067 women without the disease. *British Journal of Cancer*. 87 (11): 1234-45.

² Singletary, K. W. & S. M. Gapstur (2001) Alcohol and breast cancer: review of epidemiological and experimental evidence and potential mechanism. *Jama* 286 (17) 2143-51

