

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION. CHARACTERISTICS, MEDICAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

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Keywords: alcohol, violence, Europe, Romania
Abstract: Today, alcohol addiction has the largest expansion in all population groups, as recognized by the experts in various fields as a true "pandemic toxic". Alcohol and drugs are the main causes for the increase of the crime rate. Statistics show that alcohol consumption is correlated with 50% of suicide cases, 80% of crimes, 30% of serious traffic accidents and 15% of drowning cases. The paper aims at providing an insight into the level and trend of alcohol consumption in Europe and Romania based on the statistics of the last decade.

Cuvinte cheie: alcool, violență, Europa, România
Rezumat: În prezent, alcoolismul este toxicomania cu expansiunea cea mai mare în toate grupurile de populație, fiind recunoscută de specialiștii din diverse domenii drept o adevărată "pandemie toxică". Alcoolul și drogurile sunt principalii vinovați pentru creșterea ratei criminalității. Statisticile arată că consumul de alcool este corelat cu 50% din cazurile de sinucideri, 80% din crime, 30% din accidentele rutiere grave și crica 15% din cazurile de înec. Scopul lucrării este de a oferi o imagine asupra nivelului și tendinței consumului de alcool în Europa și România pe baza statisticilor efectuate în ultimul deceniu.

Alcohol consumption and social behaviour

The medical scientific approach of this century considers the health of an individual as a result of medical and social effects of the health of human communities. Human health is a global multifactorial concept in which lifestyle determinants play a very important part. Today, alcoholism is the addiction with the widest expansion in all population categories, as recognized by the experts in many fields (medical, social, economic, legal) as a true "pandemic toxic".

Alcohol is a social danger both by its toxic potential (as associated toxicity) and as a trigger of aggressive behaviour. Alcohol equally affects individuals with appropriated personality structure and those with labile personality structure. Both categories may exhibit aggressive behaviour in the presence of alcohol consumption.

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Alcohol consumption in EU

Europe is the region with the highest rate of alcohol consumption per capita in the world.(7) According to the Ministry of Public Health, EU annually spends 125 billion Euros (equivalent to 1.3% of the GDP) for accidents, homicides, diseases, injuries and other damages caused by alcohol.(2) Approximately 9 million children live in families affected by alcohol consumption, according to the same source.

Total consumption of alcohol in the European WHO Regions is 12.8 litres of pure alcohol per capita - 15 years old and over, of which 2.67 litres unregistered alcohol (21.9%) consumption.(3)

"Special Eurobarometer 331. EU Citizens' attitudes Towards Alcohol" (7) identifies the main characteristics of the alcohol consumption in 27 EU Countries in 2009, compared to 2006:

- on average, 76% of the population have consumed alcohol in the last 12 months (84% were men and 68% were women), without significant differences from the previous study (75% in 2006);
- alcohol consumption is relatively constant throughout the year (88% of drinkers in the last 12 months have consumed alcohol in the last 30 days. In 2006, the percentage was similar (87%);
- the proportion of occasionally European drinkers is relatively low (12% of consumers);
- the highest level of alcohol consumption is recorded in Denmark (93%), Sweden (90%) and Netherlands (88%);
- the lowest levels were recorded in Portugal (58%), Italy (60%) and Hungary (64%);
- people aged 55 years and over have the highest frequency of alcohol consumption/week (25%), the young drinkers only 3%;
- young people drink more alcohol (25% of the young aged between 15 and 24 years old consume more than 5 doses of alcohol in an episode compared to 11% of older drinkers);
- men are more likely constant drinkers (92%) and women are generally occasional drinkers;

Alcohol consumption in Romania

Monitoring data in Romania for alcohol consumption are extremely poor and discontinuous. The latest survey on health determinants by the Ministry of Health was made in 1997. The only studies conducted in Romania in the last decade were the international studies such as ESPAD (European School Survey on Alcohol and Drugs) or HBSC (Health Related Behaviour in School Children).

"European Status Report on Alcohol and Health 2010" (5) presents a country profile. According to this report, during 2003-2005, in Romania, the recorded alcohol consumption in adults (15 years+) is approximately 11.3 litres of pure alcohol per capita per year and registers a stable trend during the studied

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Article received on 18.04.2012 and accepted for publication on 22.06.2012
ACTA MEDICA TRANSILVANICA September 2012;2(3):148-150

period. However, the values have doubled over the last 3 decades. The unrecorded alcohol consumption is approximately 4 litres of pure alcohol per capita per year. Thus, the total consumption of alcohol is 15.3 litres of pure alcohol per capita per year. Comparatively, in the European countries, the total alcohol consumption is 12.2 litres of pure alcohol per capita per year.

The level of alcohol consumption (as calculated regardless of the "hard" or "light" style of drinking) does not provide the actual size of the alcohol consumption by the persons who declare themselves as real drinkers. The alcohol consumption level for the 15 years+ persons who declare to be drinkers is of 24.48% of pure alcohol per capita per year, of which 31,75 litres are consumed by men and 15.02 litres are consumed by women.(5)

In the same document, quoted by the Centre for Evaluation and Health Promotion Romania (8), in terms of consumption patterns for 2005, WHO identifies the following pattern of consumption in Romania:

- equal alcohol consumption of beer and spirits (39% of consumers) and wine (22% of consumers);
- abstinent population (people who have not drunk in the last 12 months) represent 37.5%, of which 24.4% are former drinkers and 13.1% are non-drinkers (people who have never consumed alcohol during their lifetime);
- of the abstinent people, 22.1% are men and 51.6% are women;
- abstinent male population structure comprises 15.6% of former drinkers and only 6.5% of non-drinkers, a value warning about the small number of people who have opted for living responsibly, refusing alcohol;
- abstinent women population structure contains 32.5% female former drinker, respectively 19, 1% non-drinkers.

Studies run by the National Anti-drug Agency (4) on knowledge, practices and attitudes of the general population (above the age of 15) regarding the drug use (NAA 2007 and NAA 2004) have described the following trends of alcohol consumption:

- a decreased prevalence of alcohol consumption in the age group of 25-34 years old in men, from 94.8% in 2004 to 92.8% in 2007;
- an increased prevalence of alcohol consumption in the age group of 25-34 years old in women, from 73.7% in 2004 to 82.9% in 2007;
- prevalence of alcohol throughout life in the above-mentioned age group decreased from 89% in 2004 to 83.4% in 2007;
- in the age group of 35-44 years old, there was a decreased prevalence of alcohol consumption during lifetime from 91.1% in 2004 to 84.7% in 2007;
- the age group of 45-54 years old registered a decrease in prevalence from 88.4% in 2004 to 86.5% in 2004;
- data from the two surveys (in 2004 and 2007) concluded that the whole population alcohol consumption decreased approximately by five percent, for all reference periods;
- a strong association between alcohol consumption and the socio-economic level, with high-income people more likely to drink alcohol than the people with low income;
- an association between alcohol consumption and marital status; the married subjects show a relative risk of alcohol consumption than the unmarried;
- a highly statistically significant association between alcohol consumption and educational level;
- a highly statistically significant association between alcohol consumption and smoking status, alcohol consumption in the population of smokers is higher;

- there were no statistically significant association between alcohol consumption and the following variables: locality size and ethnicity.

Similar results were reported by the Romanian Ministry of Health and the Regional Centre for Public Health of Sibiu in 2005 regarding the study "Attitudes and Behaviours Related to Healthy Lifestyle".(1) According to the previously mentioned study, the analysis of the type of consumer in terms of equivalent volume of alcohol indicates the following:

- 43% of respondents have consumed alcohol in the last week;
- 18.4% of consumers are "light" drinkers, with a weekly equivalent consumption of alcohol up to 2 bottles of beer;
- 27% are "medium" drinkers, who uses a weekly equivalent alcohol consumption of 2-7 bottles of beer;
- 11% drink "hard", weekly consuming an amount of alcohol equivalent to more than 7 bottles of beer.

Along with the increase of alcohol consumption intensity, the proportion of men in that category also increases, the consumption being strongly dependent on the person's gender. If "light" drinkers are represented rather by women (68% of consumers), "medium" drinkers (71% of consumers) and "hard" drinkers (94% of consumers) are the men.

Like tobacco, alcohol consumption knows a diachronic evolution, with a differentiate consumption according to the age group. Thus, if "light" drinkers are found in all age groups, "medium" consumers segment is found predominantly in the age group of 30-39 years old, while the "hard" segment is encountered in the age group of 40 to 49 years old.

Cultural influence depending on the geographical region of residence is significant for alcohol intensity. If among Transylvanian regions the highest abstinence is met, Bucharest residents are rather "light" consumers, the Moldavians and Wallachians are more "medium" and "hard" consumers.

More than half of the "hard" drinkers (52%) are daily smokers, while 58% of the "medium" consumers and 69% of the "light" consumers do not smoke at all.

More than half of the "light" alcohol consumers (57%), 64% of the "medium" consumers and 68% of the "hard" drinkers appreciate their health status as "good" and/or "pretty good", most of them considering that in the last three years, their health condition has been stable. If age is also taken into account, we found that for the age group of 30-39 years old, the "hard" consumers complain about chest pains, back or joints pain and insomnia. Drinkers and heavy smokers have cough with expectoration.

In terms of body weight evolution, "hard" drinkers are characterized by stability.(Ibidem)

Morbidity caused by alcohol in Romania

Information on morbidity is few due to system fragmentation and inconsistency of data on alcohol consumption, known only by estimations made within international studies, which have mainly used data on mortality. In terms of disease burden attributable to alcohol, Romania is characterized by medium risk (score 3 on a scale from 1 to 5).(8)

According to the estimations made by the Romanian Ministry of Public Health, over 17,000 people die annually due to alcohol consumption and over half of them die during their working life (between 20 and 64 age group). Mortality in adulthood (20-64 years old) attributable to alcohol consumption is three times higher in men and 1.5 times in women in Romania compared to EU 15 (Member States until 2004). Among the causes of mortality attributable to alcohol consumption, there are accidents (mortality rate three times above the EU 15 average), cardiovascular diseases (mortality twice the average of EU10 - the new Member States - and eight times the EU15

average) and liver cirrhosis (mortality more than double the EU15 countries).”

Standardized mortality rates in people above the age of 15 years old (per 100,000 inhabitants) recorded the following values for the period 2000-2005:

- liver cirrhosis: from 60.2 to 71.6 in males, 28.1 to 33.1 in women;
- alcoholic liver disease: from 6.1 to 9.2 in men, 1.8 to 2.4 in women;
- road traffic accidents: 19.4 to 21.5 for males, 5.4 to 6.8 in women;
- poisoning: 5.7 to 7.8 in men, 2.7 to 3.6 in women;
- violence: 4.2 to 6.6 in men, 1.4 to 2.3 in women.(8)

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