

The trouble with drinking guidelines: What, in the world, is a standard drink?

The controversy over the UK's new safe drinking guidelines revealed how much people within a country can disagree about drinking. It turns out that countries disagree with each other, too.

It's a widely accepted fact that excessive drinking of alcohol is bad for one's health. But what constitutes excessive drinking? According to a new report published today by the scientific journal *Addiction*, the answer to that question varies widely by country, and many countries don't provide an answer.

Researchers looked at 75 countries that might be expected to provide low-risk drinking guidelines and a definition of a 'standard drink'. Only 37 countries (under 50%) did so, and their guidelines and 'standard drink' definitions were surprisingly inconsistent.

The size of a standard drink varies by 250%, from a low of 8 g in Iceland and the United Kingdom to a high of 20 g in Austria. An 8 g drink is equivalent to 250 ml (8.45 US fluid ounces) of 4% beer, 76 ml (2.57 oz) of 13% wine, or 25 ml (0.85 oz) of 40% spirits.

In the most conservative countries, low-risk consumption means drinking no more than 10 g of pure ethanol per day for women, 20 g for men.

Want to drink more? In Chile, you can drink 56 g per day and still be a low-risk drinker.

Got a reason to celebrate? In Australia, Canada, Denmark, Fiji, France, Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, and the UK, you are allowed to drink more on special occasions.

Tired of the old double standard? In Australia, Grenada, Portugal, and South Africa, low-risk drinking guidelines are the same for women and men. The UK joins that list with its new guidelines.

Co-author of the report Keith Humphreys says, "If you think your country should have a different definition of a standard drink or low-risk drinking, take heart - there's probably another country that agrees with you."

The World Health Organization defines a standard drink as 10 g of pure ethanol, with both men and women advised not to exceed 2 standard drinks per day. Although the WHO's definition of a standard drink is the one most often used, 50% of countries with drinking guidelines don't use it.

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For editors:

Kalinowski A and Humphreys K (2016) Governmental Standard Drink Definitions and Low-Risk Alcohol Consumption Guidelines in 37 Countries. *Addiction* 111: [doi:10.1111/add.13341](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13341)

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Addiction

is the number one journal in the 2015 ISI Journal Citation Reports Ranking in the Substance Abuse Category (Social Science Edition).