

Enhanced minimum-pricing strategy on alcohol could result in less harm for consumers

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(Medical Xpress)—Consumers tend to switch to less potent alcoholic beverages when minimum prices are raised for cheap, strong drinks, new research from the University of Victoria's Centre for Addictions Research of BC (CARBC) shows.

Co-authored with the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto, the report also indicates the measure successfully reduces the consumption of [ethanol](#), the harmful ingredient of [alcoholic drinks](#), and so lowers the risk of harmful health effects.

The new report, "The Raising of Minimum Alcohol Prices in Saskatchewan, Canada: Impacts on Consumption and Implications for Public Health," released today in the [American Journal of Public Health](#), examines the impact of new and increased minimum alcohol prices, including adjustments based on percentage of alcohol content—higher prices for higher alcohol content—in Saskatchewan.

Governments are increasingly looking at minimum pricing and how it relates to [alcohol consumption](#). Both Scotland and the UK plan to implement minimum alcohol pricing, but the Scotch Whisky Association has sought a judicial review and the governments of France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Bulgaria have raised concerns with the [European Commission](#).

Looking at sales data from both before and after the comprehensive strategy was implemented in Saskatchewan, the study found consumption of higher-strength beers and wines decreased the most—a 10-per cent increase in the price of cheap high alcohol-strength beer (greater than 6.5 per cent) results in a 22-per cent reduction in consumption, compared with an 8.17-per cent reduction for beer with lower alcohol content. Overall, the study found that a comprehensive 10-per cent increase in minimum prices brings an 8.43-per cent decrease in consumption, more than double the 3.4-per cent reduction in alcohol consumption found in an earlier CARBC minimum pricing study of data from British Columbia, where only the price of cheap spirits was increased with [regularity](#).

"We know minimum pricing of alcohol works to reduce consumption. This study tells how to implement the policy most effectively," says Dr. Tim Stockwell, CARBC director and lead author of the report, adding that UVic research is leading the study of minimum pricing of alcohol, providing the first empirical evidence of the strategy's effectiveness.

The report notes there is strong evidence that: reduced alcohol consumption lowers rates of related illnesses, injuries and social problems; high strength products are associated with risky patterns of consumption; and younger and heavier drinkers tend to choose cheaper alcohol. The Saskatchewan approach of raising prices of the cheapest and highest-strength alcohol can therefore be expected to give most benefits to those individuals who are at greatest risk of health and social problems due to their drinking, Stockwell says. Furthermore, he adds, encouraging all drinkers to shift to lower [alcohol-content](#) products will have additional, more widespread benefits.

More information: ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/.../105/AJPH.2012.301094

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