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COMMITTEE ON CARCINOGENICITY OF CHEMICALS IN FOOD, CONSUMER PRODUCTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Schutze M et al. Alcohol attributable burden of incidence of cancer in eight European countries based on results from prospective cohort study. BMJ Online first. Accessed 30 June 2011

The COC reviewed the carcinogenicity of alcoholic beverages in 1995 as part of the health input to the Interdepartmental Working Group on the Sensible Drinking Message. From 2002 to 2004, the COC conducted a further review on alcoholic beverages and breast cancer. As part of this, the Department of Health commissioned a systematic review and subsequent meta-analyses from Imperial College Department of Epidemiology and Public Health which aimed to determine the magnitude of any association between drinking alcohol and primary breast cancer and to estimate the population attributable risk (PAR). Assuming causality and that 1 unit of alcohol contains 8 g ethanol, the PAR calculated from the best quality studies was 6.0% (95% CI 3.2%-8.8%), ie this percentage of breast cancers reported in the UK each year could be prevented if drinking was reduced to a very low level (ie less than 1 unit/week).. A further review by the COC of the relationship between alcohol and squamous cell carcinoma of the oesophagus did not include a calculation of PAR.

The attached information paper is a recent publication which has estimated the alcohol attributable fraction of cancer in eight European countries. The proportion of cancer cases attributable to former and current alcohol use in men aged >15 years was 10 (7-13) and in women was 3 (1-5). For breast cancer in women, it was 5 (2-8).