

# 6 Americans Die Daily from Alcohol Poisoning

---

 [usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2015/01/06/6-americans-die-every-day-from-alcohol-poisoning](http://usnews.com/news/blogs/data-mine/2015/01/06/6-americans-die-every-day-from-alcohol-poisoning)

Kimberly Leonard

Americans who drink too much don't have to get behind the wheel to risk their lives. In fact, a [new report](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows alcohol poisoning kills an average of six people a day.

The most unexpected finding: Deaths from alcohol poisoning are highest among middle-age men.

"The majority of these deaths are not among college students, whom we typically associate with binge drinking," Ileana Arias, principal deputy director for the CDC, said in a teleconference Tuesday with reporters. "We were surprised."

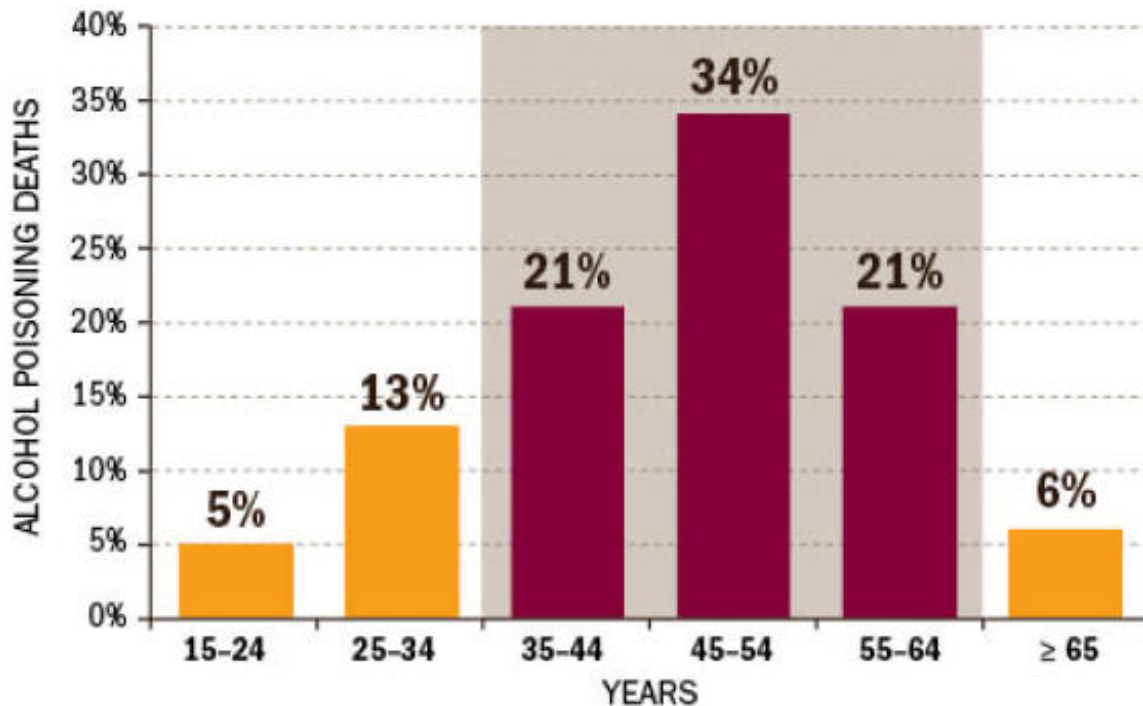
[[READ: Teen Drinking Continues to Decline in the U.S.](#)]

Alcohol-poisoning deaths are caused by drinking large amounts of [alcohol](#) in a short time, which can cause the body to shut down areas of the brain that control breathing, heart rate and body temperature – leading to a coma or even death.

The new [report](#) analyzed deaths from alcohol poisoning among people 15 and older, using death certificates from the National Vital Statistics System from 2010 to 2012. Alcohol dependence, or alcoholism, was identified as a contributing factor in 30 percent of deaths from alcohol poisoning. Other drugs were noted to have been a factor in about 3 percent of deaths, and hypothermia – or abnormally low body temperature – was listed as a contributing cause of death in 6 percent of cases.

A total of 2,200 Americans die from alcohol poisoning each year. Three in 4 alcohol-poisoning deaths involve adults ages 35 to 64, with the highest concentration among people who are 45 to 54 years old. About 76 percent of deaths occur among men, and nearly 70 percent occur among non-Hispanic whites. "Obviously we still have serious alcohol addictions around people in middle age that are unaddressed or untreated," says Dr. Antoine Douaihy, an associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh.

# Alcohol poisoning deaths are most common among middle aged adults



SOURCES: CDC Vital Signs, January, 2015. [www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns](http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns).  
National Center for Health Statistics Mortality Multiple Cause Files, 2010-2012.

Adults ages 45 to 54 have the highest rates of alcohol poisoning.

Because the the procedure for classifying such deaths has changed over the past few years, government health officials say they believe the study's findings may be low.

"When people think about alcohol, they tend to think about two problems: addiction and drinking and driving," says David Jernigan, who directs the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "This [report] shows there is another big problem – you can die from alcohol itself."

The study strikingly shows that even people who are not dependent on alcohol can die from it. Dr. Jan Mayer, a psychiatrist on the clinical advisory board of the American Addiction Centers, says alcohol dependency is a progression that happens over time, ultimately resulting in symptoms of restlessness, elevated blood pressure, shakiness, irritability and sometimes seizures. "People with alcohol problems are often in denial," he says. "If they are addicted they should be abstinent."

The government's [2010 Dietary Guidelines](#) for Americans recommend up to one drink a day for women and up to two drinks a day for men. Still, more than 38 million U.S. adults report binge drinking an average of four times per month and consume an average of eight drinks per binge. Beer is by far the alcohol of choice for most adults, while liquor is most consumed by people who are underage, says Dr. Robert Brewer, a co-author of the report and leader of the CDC's Alcohol Program.

Binge drinking is defined as consuming four or more drinks for women and five or more drinks for men during any individual occasion. This consumption leads to a blood alcohol level that exceeds 0.08 grams per deciliter, meaning it would be illegal to drive in all states.

Binge drinking is highest among young adults, but deaths from alcohol poisoning within this age group are the lowest, at 5 percent. Young people will stay awake longer and can tolerate higher amounts of alcohol, Jernigan says, but he points out there is no such thing as "increased tolerance" against heart or liver disease. Young people also model their behavior based on what they see from adults like their parents, he says.

Studies also have shown that – much like with tobacco use – the earlier people start drinking, the more likely they are to have problems with alcohol later in life.

"A lot of people drink heavily in college then leave it behind, but some don't," Mayer says. "If people have continued to drink then their ability to stop the behavior diminishes because of the changes in the brain ... The whole point is if you're young and binge drinking you better stop now or you'll progress to this point."

Most people who binge drink are not dependent on alcohol. Nine in 10 adults who drink excessively are not alcohol-dependent, according to the CDC study, including more than two-thirds of those who reported binge drinking 10 or more times a month. "We have normalized alcohol use," Jernigan says. "It's impossible to think of a sporting event at this point without thinking about alcohol ... that's not how it was 40 years ago."

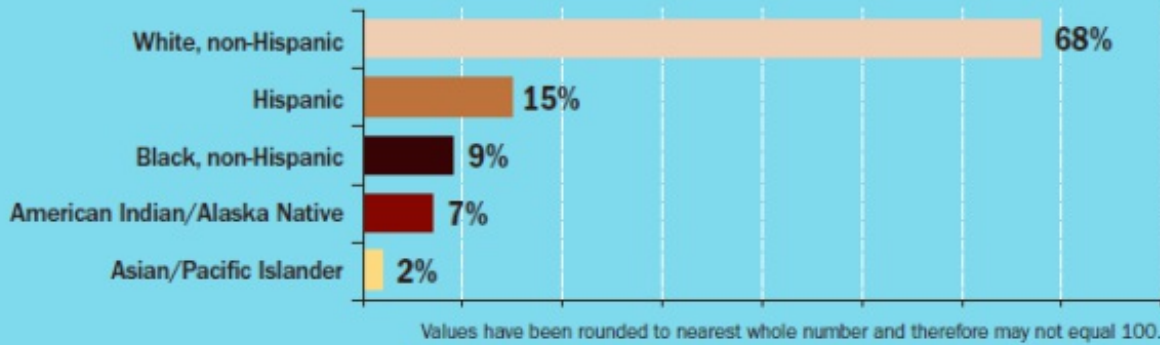


Binge drinking is defined as four drinks for women and five drinks for men.

Lisa Hawkins, a spokeswoman for the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, says the CDC findings underscore the importance of responsible drinking among adults, even though Americans have made significant progress in [reducing underage and binge drinking](#). "As previous CDC research has shown, moderate alcohol consumption can be part of a healthy adult lifestyle, but moderation is the key," she says. "The spirits industry urges adults to follow the U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommendations for alcohol consumption including knowing the definitions of moderate drinking and standard drinks."

Alcohol poisoning varies by gender and race. Though American Indians/Alaska Natives make up a smaller share of the population, they have the most alcohol-poisoning deaths per 1 million people. A [recent study](#) found that they are seven times more likely to die from alcohol poisoning than whites.

## Most people who die of alcohol poisoning are non-Hispanic whites



Alcohol poisoning varies by race.

Excessive alcohol use is a leading cause of preventable deaths in the U.S., Arias said. Over a long period, heavy alcohol intake can lead to cirrhosis or breast cancer. It also has been linked to increased violence, homicides and suicides.

Douaihy points out that excessive alcohol use also can lead to unprotected sex, car crashes or injuries. People are at higher risk of having problems with alcohol if they have a history of underlying medical issues, including high blood pressure or heart disease, he says.

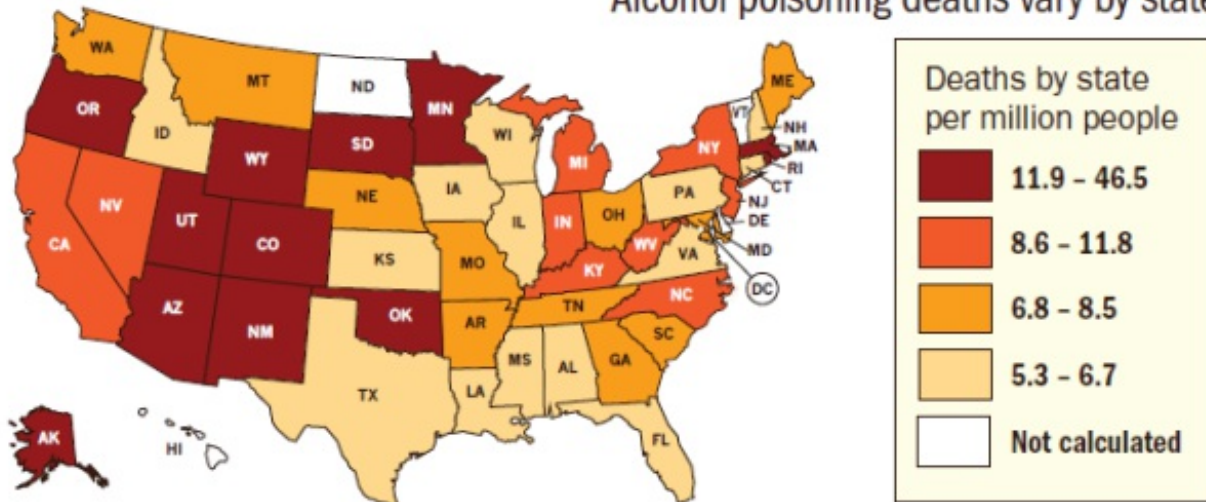
"We have a tendency to underestimate the alcohol problem we still have in the U.S.," he says.

The CDC is aiming to reduce the proportion of adults who engage in binge drinking. Excessive alcohol use accounts for [about 1 in 10 deaths](#) among working-age adults – or those 20 to 64 years old – and cost the country an estimated [\\$223.5 billion](#) in 2006. "We are all paying for the cost of excessive drinking," Arias said in the call with reporters.

The authors of the study briefly referred to expanded coverage through the Affordable Care Act [for alcohol screening and counseling](#), but CDC officials elaborated more on effective state policies that could be used to help prevent excessive alcohol intake. States with stronger alcohol policies, such as those that charge more for alcohol or reduce its availability, have less binge drinking. Brewer also cited limiting the times alcohol is sold as something that's been shown to reduce alcohol's effects and harm. And the lighter the concentration of stores that sell alcohol in a particular area, the less people will drink, he says.

The data from the report mirror how state laws might have an impact. Alcohol-poisoning death rates across states vary widely, from 46.5 deaths per 1 million residents in Alaska to 5.3 per 1 million residents in Alabama. The states with the highest death rates were in the Great Plains, western United States, and two New England states – Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

## Alcohol poisoning deaths vary by state



SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics Mortality Multiple Cause Files, 2010-2012.

3

States with stronger alcohol policies have less binge drinking, the report found.

Authors of the study hypothesized that living in a geographically isolated, rural area might increase the likelihood that a person with alcohol poisoning would not be found before death or that timely emergency medical services would not be available.