What is this research about?

Excessive alcohol use is a key public health threat to Canadians, as it causes many health, social, and financial burdens, both to the individual and society. It is the second leading risk factor for disability and disease in high income countries, yet sales, consumption, and normalization of alcohol use is on the increase.

In 2011, the Toronto Cancer Prevention Coalition released a report that recommended a set of strategies to reduce alcohol use in Ontario. One of these strategies was to increase awareness among health professionals of the health risks associated with excessive alcohol use. A key initiative to support this recommendation was to explore health and healthcare practitioners’ knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about the health risks associated with alcohol use.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers conducted a 25-question survey among health and health care practitioners working in Ontario. The survey asked participants to identify:

1. Their level of awareness of the role that excessive alcohol use plays in injuries, cancer, and chronic diseases;
2. How they address alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm reduction in their practice;
3. Opportunities and barriers that exist to help them address alcohol-related harms in their practice.

What did the researchers find?

Five hundred and eighty-one participants responded to the survey. About 35% reported working in Toronto, and 65% worked in the surrounding GTA and across Ontario.

The majority of respondents were aware of the increase in alcohol sales and that more than 50% of the province’s underage youth are...
drinking. However, their awareness of the relationship between alcohol use and chronic conditions was limited.

Half of respondents said they ask their clients about their alcohol use. The prevention strategies used most often were screening of the general population as part of regular visits, screening of high-risk clients who have more than one disorder and alcohol as a risk factor, and screening of high-risk clients who have a history of alcohol misuse and harm.

A majority of participants said they provide resources and counselling referrals to clients with high-risk drinking behaviour. But more than half said they feel somewhat unprepared to put in place alcohol-related harm reduction and prevention practices, and just over said they feel prepared to access resources to address these issues in their practice.

Respondents noted that viewing alcohol and other risk factors more holistically and as a shared modifiable risk factor would be the change that would have the largest impact on their ability to reduce alcohol-related harm in their practice. They said the province needs a comprehensive and coordinated provincial strategy to address alcohol as a risk factor for cancer and other chronic diseases.

Barriers to addressing alcohol-related harms included a shift in attitudes and social norms, especially among youth. Insufficient political will to support alcohol-harm reduction opportunities, as well as the a limited emphasis on primary prevention are also barriers.

Participants stressed the complexities of addressing alcohol use with their clients, as they may fear the negative consequences of disclosing alcohol use to their health or health care provider. Finally, they pointed to inconsistency messaging around alcohol use and ambiguity around what constitutes “drinking responsibly” versus “drinking excessively.”

**How can you use this research?**

This research shows that there needs to be ongoing efforts to create a culture of low-risk drinking, with emphasis on long-term impacts of excessive alcohol use. There needs to be increased interest among Ontario public health units to move these issues forward and to work with other health agencies to include alcohol reduction strategies. Ontario public health units can also use this research to gather local data to help guide how they access, educate, and train health professionals on alcohol-related harms and addressing clients’ use of alcohol.

**About the researchers**

Elizabeth Manafó is a Research Consultant and is a Registered Dietitian; Norman Giesbrecht is a researcher with the Public Health and Regulatory Policy Section at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health; and Romilla Gupta is with the Health Promotion, Healthy Public Policy Directorate at the Toronto Public Health Division.

This Research Snapshot is based on their article “Survey of Ontario health professionals’ knowledge, attitudes and beliefs of alcohol-related harms: key findings,” which was published in *Journal of Substance Use*, 2014; 19(14): 295-300.

**Keywords**

Alcohol, harm-reduction, prevention

Evidence Exchange Network (EENet) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots in the field of mental health and addictions in Ontario. EENet actively promotes the use of research evidence in decision-making by supporting engagement and connections between researchers and mental health and addictions stakeholders across Ontario. EENet works to develop targeted KE products and tools and supports interactive exchanges. It is supported by the Ontario Government and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. This summary was written by Angela Yip. To learn more about EENet, please visit www.eenet.ca.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 Canada License.