

World Health Organization (WHO) Takes Steps to Fight Harmful Drinking

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Nations adopted a global strategy to reduce alcohol abuse on Thursday, breaking decades of silence on one of the leading causes of death and facing down an industry wary of new taxes and advertising controls in developing markets.

In a consensus vote, the World Health Organization's 193 member states endorsed a series of optional measures to combat harmful drinking, from lowering blood alcohol limits for drivers to restricting opening hours of bars and liquor stores. The most contentious proposals affect brewers and liquor manufacturers, and deal with pricing and marketing.

"Alcohol is the risk factor for many other things," said Dr. Shekhar Saxena, director of WHO's mental health and substance abuse department. "Usually it is not perceived as the killer, but it is."

The resolution isn't a legally binding treaty, and lacks the teeth of the organization's 2005 landmark tobacco accord, which requires governments who have ratified the treaty to fight smoking. But, while WHO guidelines often follow the richest nations on innovation, they frequently have a stronger effect on governments in emerging economies where industries such as tobacco and alcohol want to broaden their business.

Harmful drinking is the third leading risk factor for disability and premature death in the world, with 2.5 million people deaths each year linked to alcohol, WHO said. That figures includes 320,000 people between 15 and 29, and the agency said many others are sickened with heart and liver diseases, cancer and even HIV/AIDS because of alcohol abuse.

The health body stopped far short in its 24-page strategy of advocating a blanket strategy for countries rich and poor, and for those where alcohol can be drunk freely and where it is officially forbidden. Still, it said many governments were failing to sufficiently prevent and reduce alcohol abuse, and that the increased affordability of beer, wine and spirits in poorer countries compelled action.

WHO intensified its alcohol work in 2008, and has faced fierce lobbying from industry groups, which at one point were excluded from discussions. They have argued that advertising bans and higher taxes don't reduce drinking.

Major liquor producers said they would comment after studying the decision.