

Country snapshot Bhutan

Alcohol and health



This snapshot provides an overview of alcohol consumption in Bhutan, its health effects, the current policy response and key opportunities for action. The snapshot was developed to accelerate progress in the implementation of the five high-impact **SAFER** interventions (1), in the context of the **Global Alcohol Action Plan** (2)¹.

As part of the **SAFER** initiative, country teams, supported by WHO, identified opportunities to advance action on alcohol policies and interventions. These cross-disciplinary country teams were nominated from different ministries or agencies with a mandate to work on alcohol, such as ministries of health, finance, trade, justice and/or transport.

► Opportunities for action



Strengthening restrictions on alcohol availability to children and adolescents under the legal age for consumption



Facilitating access to screening, brief intervention and treatment



Increasing prices on alcoholic beverages through excise taxes and fiscal policies

¹ The Global Alcohol Action Plan 2022-2030 was adopted by Member States at the Seventy-fifth World Health Assembly.



Country context

Over the last two decades, economic growth in Bhutan has contributed to substantial poverty reduction (3). Public health is a key priority in pursuit of

development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (4). This includes addressing noncommunicable diseases which are estimated to account for almost 70% of deaths (5).

► Alcohol consumption trends

- In 2022, alcohol per capita consumption was 4.4 litres per year (l/yr) of pure alcohol (15+ years) compared to 3.6 l/yr at regional level and 5.0 l/yr at global level (6).
- In 2023, according to the National Health Survey, 39.8% of people who consume alcohol reported engaging in heavy episodic drinking^{1,2} (7).
- In 2023, according to the National Health Survey, 25.2% of young people aged 15-24 years were current drinkers^{2,3} (7).

► Culture and tradition

- After giving birth, some mothers are offered to drink approximately 2 cups a day of “changkay”, a fermented rice believed to produce breastmilk (unpublished observation^{2,4} [August 2023]).
- It is customary to offer “ara”, a locally brewed alcohol to local deities and during events such as while performing rituals, seeing off guests, among others (unpublished observation, [August 2023]).
- Consuming alcohol during and after sporting events is common (unpublished observation, [August 2023]).

► Unrecorded alcohol

- More than 30% of households reported brewing alcohol at home according to the National Health Survey in 2023 (7).

¹ Heavy episodic drinking refers to consumption of 60 or more grams of pure alcohol (6+ standard drinks) on at least one single occasion in the 30 days before the survey.

² Estimates in this document should not be regarded as the nationally endorsed statistics of Member States which may have been derived using alternative methodologies. Published official national statistics, if presented, are cited and included in the reference list.

³ Current refers to having consumed alcohol in the past 30 days.

⁴ Unpublished observations refer to unpublished observations or information collected by multisectoral country teams that mapped policies and interventions across the SAFER

Health consequences of alcohol consumption

► Mortality and morbidity related to alcohol



Alcohol use disorders

among males (15+ years) is **3.3%**
12 month prevalence (2016) (6).

among females (15+ years) is **0.6%**
12 month prevalence (2016) (6).



Liver cirrhosis **due to alcohol** use death rates

among males is **10.7 per 100 000** population
(2021)¹ (8).

among females is **3.2 per 100 000** population
(2021)¹ (8).

► Alcohol dependence



of people,
15-69 years,
indicated that they
were not able to
stop drinking once
started (2019) (9)



of people,
15-69 years, needed
an alcoholic drink
first thing in the
morning (2019) (9)

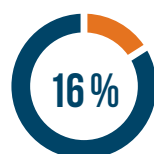


of people,
15-69 years, failed
to perform assigned
tasks due to alcohol
consumption
(2019) (9)

► Young people



of students below 18 years
consume alcohol (2016) (10)



of females below 18 years
consume alcohol (2016) (10)

Alcohol is a psychoactive substance with dependence-producing properties. The consumption of alcohol and problems related to alcohol vary widely around the world, but the burden of alcohol-related disease and death remains significant in most countries (11)

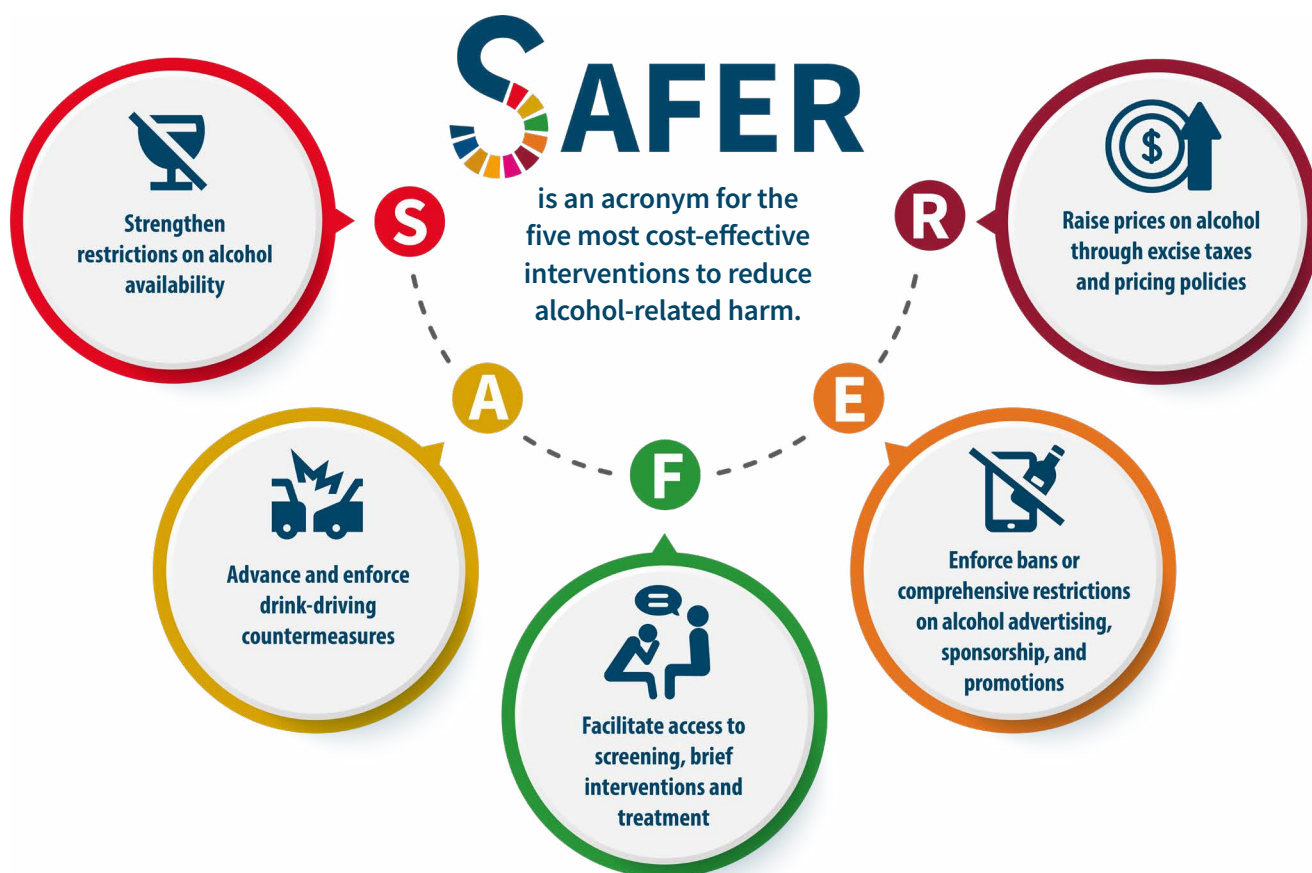


¹ Age-standardized death rates per 100 000, estimates for the year 2021.

Alcohol consumption can result in significant harm to individuals, their families and societies. Alcohol (ethanol) is a psychoactive and toxic substance that impacts multiple biological systems. The consumption of alcohol is a causal factor in more than 200 disease and injury conditions (12). Worldwide, 2.6 million deaths result from alcohol consumption yearly (11). A significant proportion of the disease burden attributable to alcohol consumption arises from unintentional and intentional injuries, including those due to road traffic crashes, violence and suicide, particularly in young people (12). Alcohol consumption presents a

significant challenge for countries, mainly due to its economic burden on the health system, criminal justice system and labour productivity.

Cultural, social and religious norms influence alcohol consumption, as well as its normalization (acceptability), ease of purchase (availability) and price (affordability). Addressing this multidimensional causality requires a portfolio of high-impact interventions. **SAFER** is a technical package that comprises five population-based interventions to reduce alcohol-related harm, allowing countries to reduce alcohol consumption and related health, social and economic consequences (1).



Policy mapping in the context of SAFER interventions¹

Strengthen restrictions on alcohol availability

- There were over 4000 bar licenses in 2018 (13).
- Before July 2023 alcohol was not sold on Tuesdays ('Dry Tuesday') (unpublished communication, [August 2023]). Now alcoholic beverages are available during shop trading hours, including grocery shopping malls.
- Enforcement to restrict the sale of alcohol to those under 18 years and to intoxicated people is a challenge (unpublished observation, [August 2023]).
- The Army Welfare Project Limited² company has a monopoly over the production of alcoholic beverages with over 8% alcohol by volume (unpublished observation, [August 2023]).

Advance and enforce drink-driving countermeasures

- The blood-alcohol concentration limit for driving is 0.08 g/dl (14).

Facilitate access to screening, brief interventions and treatment

- Screening and brief intervention services are provided across all health care facilities, where hospital-based, substance use disorder treatment and care services are established (unpublished communication, [August 2023]).
- Screening, brief interventions and referral to treatment services are provided in all middle and higher secondary schools in the country (unpublished communication, [August 2023]).

Enforce bans or comprehensive restrictions on alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and promotions

- Alcohol advertising is banned but remains a challenge to manage, particularly in social media (unpublished communication, [August 2023]).
- Legally, Army Welfare Project Limited alcoholic products require health warning labels (unpublished communication, [August 2023]).

Raise prices on alcohol through excise taxes and pricing policies

- The proposed Excise Tax Bill 2025 includes a tax of Nu 1200 per litre of pure alcohol content on alcoholic beverages (15).
- 100% sales tax is levied on imported alcoholic products (unpublished communication, [August 2023]).
- Excise duty rates of 30%, 60% and 75% are levied on domestically manufactured alcoholic beverages produced by the Army Welfare Project Limited (unpublished communication, [August 2023]).
- Sales tax is not levied on the alcoholic products produced by the Army Welfare Project Limited (unpublished communication, [August 2023]).

¹ Policy mapping was conducted as part of a landscape assessment report for the SAFER inter-country learning initiative. Multisectoral country teams were comprised of nominated representatives from ministries and agencies with a mandate to work on alcohol such as health, finance, trade, justice and/or transport.

² Army Welfare Project Limited is an alcohol manufacturing unit established for army personnel in the country. The proceeds go to the welfare of the defence force.

Opportunities for Action

As part of the SAFER inter-country learning initiative, country teams, supported by WHO, identified opportunities to advance action on policies and interventions. Key points are captured below and could be considered as potential future actions.

Strengthening restrictions on alcohol availability to young people



Key actions could include:

- strengthening compliance regarding restricting alcohol sales to young people
- developing advocacy materials
- sensitizing the business community
- implementing enforcement measures
- developing a monitoring and evaluation strategy.

Improving access to screening, brief interventions and referral to treatment



Key actions could include:

- developing guidelines for screening, brief interventions and referral to treatment
- rolling out screening, brief interventions and referral to treatment in health facilities
- training primary health care workers, including providing professional opportunities through peer coaching to advance add full stop after skills.

Increasing the price on alcoholic beverages through taxes and pricing policies



Key actions could include:

- applying excise tax on imported alcoholic beverages
- developing advocacy materials
- sensitizing the business community and implementing enforcement measures.

National resource policies/regional reports

- Gross National Happiness Index guides economic planning and development (4).
- Bhutan's Twelfth Five Year Plan (2018-2023) (16).
- 2013–2018 National Policy and Strategic Framework to Reduce Harmful Use of Alcohol.
- 2015 Multisectoral National Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (17).
- Alcohol Policy in the WHO South-East Asia Region: A Report (2017) (18).
- Making South-East Asia SAFER from alcohol-related harm: Current status and way forward (2019) (19).

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