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New figures on UK alcohol related deaths

The alcohol-related death rate in the UK increased from 0.7 per 10,000 population in 1991 to 1.3 in 2004, with the number of alcohol-related deaths rising from 4,144 in 1991 to 8,380 in 2004. These figures are based on a new harmonised definition of alcohol-related deaths that has been recently agreed across the UK. It is important to note that they include all deaths from cirrhosis, whether alcohol related or not, this is because it is medically unclear as to the exact percentage that can be attributed to alcohol, estimated to be between 30% and 60%.

The most worrying trend in increased alcohol related mortality is among males and females aged between 35 and 54 years, Men aged 35 to 54 had the highest death rate, rising from 1.7 deaths per 10,000 in 1991 to 3.8 deaths in 2004. The death rate for women aged 35 to 54 rose from 0.9 to 1.8 deaths per 10,000 population.

Death rates are much higher for males than females and in recent years the gap between the sexes has widened. In 2004 the male death rate, at 1.8 deaths per 10,000 population, was twice the rate for females (0.85 deaths per 10,000) and males accounted for over two thirds of the total number of deaths.

Helen Symons, of charity Alcohol Concern, said: "These new figures are certainly worrying, particularly the increase in death rates for people in their 30s and 40s, which may indicate that increased drinking at an earlier age is having a serious impact on health later in life. Another factor to take into account is the sharp rise in obesity".

The vast majority of the 8,380 deaths in 2004 were due to chronic liver disease and cirrhosis, but the figure also includes those from accidental alcohol poisoning, alcoholic cardiomyopathy (heart damage) and 'mental and behavioural disorders' due to alcohol misuse.

The ONS says it is difficult to tell how many of these deaths are due to alcohol and how many to other causes. Removing all liver disease deaths where alcohol was not mentioned would have excluded 1,867 deaths in England and Wales in 1999 using ICD-9 and 1,781 using ICD-10 (34% and 33% respectively of previously published figures for total alcohol-related deaths in 1999). For 2004, the most recent year, ONS would have reported 1,979 fewer alcohol-related deaths in England and Wales (4,784 rather than 6,581).

The ONS has just reviewed its policy for collating alcohol related deaths and has concluded that given the uncertainty about the number of cases in which alcohol may have contributed ONS considers that the current position should be maintained. All liver disease deaths where alcohol is not mentioned (other than biliary cirrhosis) should contribute to the count of alcohol-related mortality.

Although some respondents to the review did raise concerns about the inclusion of liver disease deaths where alcohol was not explicitly mentioned in this definition, ONS believes that for the purposes of monitoring public health the exclusion of these cases would

lead to a serious underestimate of drinking-related mortality.

For more information visit www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=1091

