

Leading risk factors for health in Europe: fact sheet

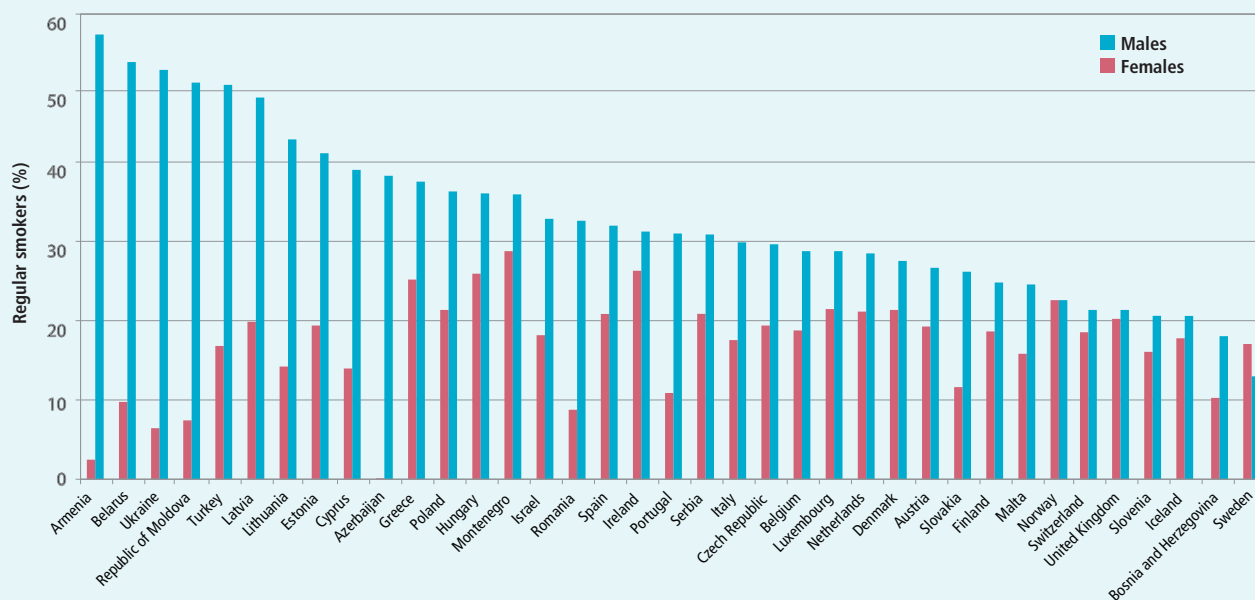
Tobacco use, the harmful use of alcohol and environmental hazards are the main risk factors responsible for the top killer diseases in the WHO European Region: cancer and diseases of the circulatory, respiratory and digestive systems.

Tobacco

- Although many countries have implemented various tobacco control strategies, tobacco use is still one of the Region's most common risk factors for the disease burden.
- The prevalence of tobacco use in the European Region reached an average of 27% of the population aged over 15 years in 2010. This figure is the highest among all the WHO regions.
- Smoking prevalence is twice as high among men as women (Fig. 1), although more women than men smoke every day.
- Banning smoking in public places is a major strategy to reduce tobacco consumption.
- An important determinant of tobacco use prevalence is the affordability of tobacco products. Increasing the prices of all such products is highly effective in reducing demand. As cigarette prices in European countries range from US\$ 1 to over US\$ 10 per pack, however, a coordinated approach is needed.



Fig. 1. Prevalence of regular smokers among the population aged 15 years and over in countries in the European Region, by sex, last reported data, 2006–2010

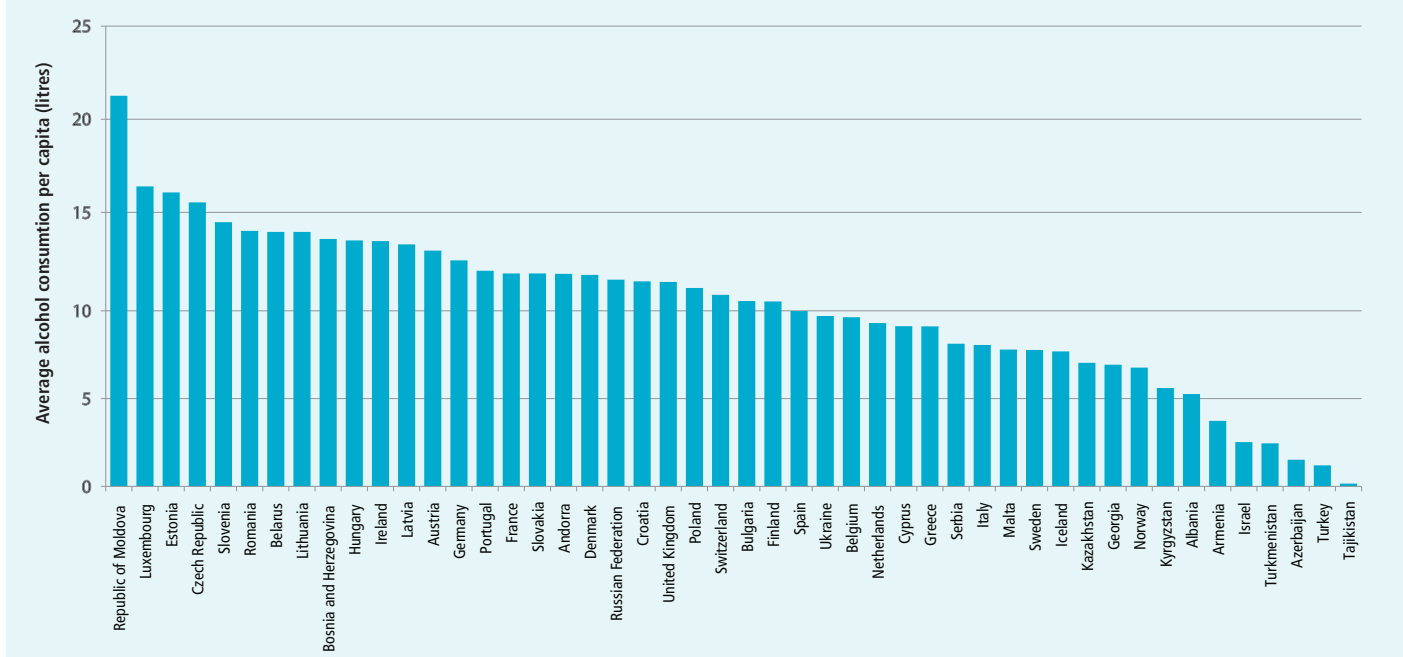


- WHO calls for action to address the aggressive marketing of tobacco products to young people, women and people with lower socioeconomic status. This requires equally aggressive and coordinated health policies, including those outlined in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC).
- Worldwide, 176 countries have ratified the FCTC since its entry into force in February 2005. In the European Region, 49 out of 53 countries and the European Community are Parties to it.

Harmful use of alcohol

- Alcohol consumption in the WHO European Region is the highest in the world. Estimated per capita consumption has remained almost unchanged in the Region over the past decade, at an average of 10.6 litres. Estimated average consumption levels vary significantly between countries, from 21 litres to less than 0.5 litres per person (Fig. 2).
- According to WHO estimates, the harmful use of alcohol accounts for nearly 6.5% of all deaths in Europe.
- In addition to volume, the type of alcoholic drinks consumed matters: the higher the alcohol content, the greater the negative health effects. Countries with higher levels of spirits consumption have a higher burden of alcohol-related disease.
- The affordability and accessibility of alcohol are important influences on consumption and the related disease burden. Evidence shows that, when alcohol prices were reduced, alcohol-related deaths among adults aged 40–69 years increased by 17–40%. Further, the lower the price, the higher the frequency of binge drinking, a more serious threat to health.

Fig. 2. Average alcohol consumption per capita among the population aged 15 years and over in countries in the European Region, last reported data, 2006–2010



Environmental risk factors

- Environmental factors are estimated to be responsible for 13–20% of the burden of disease in Europe. They contribute significantly to increased risks for a number of noncommunicable diseases, notably cancer and cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.
- Air quality varies across the European Region; the median value for particulate matter with an aerodynamic diameter smaller than 10 microns (PM₁₀), 26 µg/m³, exceeds the WHO guideline value, 20 µg/m³ (Fig. 3). Nevertheless, some negative health effects have been observed in Europe at lower average exposure levels (10 µg/m³).
- Data indicate that the highest PM₁₀ level in countries (61 µg/m³) is more than 4 times the lowest (14 µg/m³). Of the 35 countries with available data, 80% showed levels exceeding the standard threshold, while 15% had values at least double the standard.
- Evidence indicates that air pollution accounts for, on average, eight months – and more than two years in the most polluted cities – of life lost.

This information
is taken from
The European health
report 2012: charting the
way to well-being.

To download the report,
or for more information, visit
[http://www.euro.who.int/
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Fig. 3. Average annual air concentration of PM₁₀ in large cities in countries in the European Region, last reported data, 2006–2009

