

HOW TO REPORT ON ALCOHOL: A GUIDE FOR THE MEDIA

NIJZ National Institute
of Public Health

SOPA

 **EUROPEAN UNION**
EUROPEAN SOCIAL FUND
INVESTING IN YOUR FUTURE



The publication is financed by the European Social Fund and by the Republic of Slovenia.

This booklet is a shortened handy version of the publication *Reporting about alcohol in the media: Recommendations for public health-appropriate reporting about alcoholic beverages in the mass media*. The longer publication explains more in detail the alcohol problem, the role of the media and the individual recommendations, which are presented here.

The longer version also provides examples of appropriate and inappropriate reporting and use of expressions.

The longer version of the publication is available on the website www.sopa.si and www.nijz.si.

THE ALCOHOL PROBLEM IN SLOVENIA

In terms of the harmful consequences of drinking alcohol, Europe is the most heavily burdened region in the world, and within it, Slovenia is well above the average for this burden.

The harmful consequences of excessive alcohol consumption can be seen at the level of the individual, the family and their wider environment.

Research shows that there is no safe limit for drinking alcohol, and any alcohol consumption carries with it a certain level of risk for the health and wellbeing both of the person and their surroundings.





EVERY DAY in Slovenia hospitals treat

10 new patients due to reasons exclusively attributable to alcohol, two



and every day at least **2** people die from the same reasons.



On average, every inhabitant of Slovenia

aged **15** and over drank



91 L

beer



48 L

wine



3 L

spirits

in **2019**.

WET CULTURE

- a tolerant attitude towards alcohol consumption
- a large proportion of the population that drinks alcohol excessively
- the presence of alcohol in culture and customs
- handing down patterns of drinking from generation to generation
- accessibility of alcohol
- inadequate number of evidence-based prevention programmes.

THE MEDIA ARE KEY ACTORS IN SOCIETY

that raise public awareness about health, and are an important stakeholder in tackling the alcohol problem in the community, since:

- **they spread important messages about the harmfulness** of alcohol and the alcohol problem in Slovenia;
- **they are a source of information about where to get help** and about programmes aimed at improving health in the community;
- they contribute to ***whether and how we think about the alcohol problem and drinking***;
- they influence our **attitude towards drinking alcohol**, our **understanding of hazardous drinking**, our **expectations regarding the consequences of drinking alcohol** and our **beliefs about how widespread and acceptable drinking is** among our peers, in the community and in society.



1. Inform people that alcohol consumption in Slovenia represents a major public health and social problem, and that there are effective measures to deal with it.

- **Write about the alcohol issue and its magnitude.**
- Shed light on the **problems of drinking alcohol for everyone**, and while doing so also highlight **vulnerable** groups of people.
- If you are writing about the problems of drinking alcohol, do not limit yourself just to specific groups of people (such as adolescents and pregnant women), since this normalises drinking in the general population.
- **Point out that we too can find ourselves in situations with harmful effects of alcohol** (such as driving under the influence of alcohol).
- Address alcohol **as a problem** when you mention it.
- Provide information on **evidence-based measures and programmes to reduce the alcohol problem**.

2. Inform people that there is no safe limit for drinking alcohol and that not drinking is the only safe choice for health.

- Inform people that there is **no safe limit for drinking** alcohol, and drinking any alcohol carries risks.
- Inform people that the **public health recommendation regarding alcohol consumption is 'as little as possible or not at all'**.
- Inform people about **healthy alternatives** and **encourage them to choose such alternatives**.
- **Explain what the limits mean** when you are reporting about the limits of less hazardous alcohol drinking. Provide graphic presentations or references to quantities of typical alcoholic beverages where there is not enough space to explain the units (e.g. 1 dl of wine and not 10 g of pure alcohol).
- When you report on the limits of less hazardous alcohol drinking, **do not present it as a recommendation but rather as a statement about lower risk to health**.
- **Highlight separately those groups for which the recommendation is definitely 'no alcohol'**, if you are reporting about the limits of less hazardous alcohol drinking.
- **In pieces where you just mention alcohol**, also take into account that there is no safe limit for drinking alcohol and that drinking any alcohol carries risks, even though the alcohol problem is not the main topic.

3. When preparing a piece that refers to alcohol, always take into account facts about the negative consequences of drinking alcohol; in particular highlight its negative impact on family relations.



- Take the opportunity when mentioning alcohol to point out its negative consequences for the health of individuals, those close to them and their surroundings.
- Keep in mind not only the **short-term and obvious negative consequences**, but also those that are **less obvious** and those **that arise and are manifested more gradually**.
- Where possible, **highlight especially** the negative consequences for the **mental health of the close circle of people and for family relations**.

4. Avoid linking alcoholic beverage consumption to success in public, social and sex life, etc.

- Avoid linking alcohol consumption to the idea that it contributes to greater sociability and a better sex life.
- Where it is not necessary, **avoid linking alcohol consumption to social events**. If alcohol is presented as an essential or obvious part of such events, this helps shape and maintain the wet culture.
- **Avoid illustrative depictions** or descriptions of opportunities for drinking alcohol.
- Avoid portraying drinking alcohol as something fun, positive or even 'gutsy', since this can additionally encourage drinking.
- If you cannot avoid noting the possible positive aspects of drinking alcohol, make sure you **also state the risks and negative aspects** that can result from drinking.
- **Do not use images** that show individuals drinking alcohol (e.g. individuals in a photo smiling and sharing a toast) and **that carry a positive emotional appeal**. Furthermore, do not use images that show young people drinking alcohol.

5. Avoid mentioning alcoholic beverages where this is not necessary, and avoid showing them.

- If it is not important in terms of content, **do not mention drinking alcoholic beverages**, since this presents drinking as something commonplace, normal and unproblematic.
- If mentioning alcohol is contextually important for the piece, try to heed **as many recommendations as possible**.

Where it is harder to avoid showing alcohol, we recommend that:

- photographs or video clips do not encourage alcohol use and **do not embellish** or glorify drinking alcohol;
- you avoid portrayals of drinking linked to driving;
- you avoid portrayals that **stigmatise** (e.g. of persons who are visibly drunk or are incapacitated due to alcohol);
- you avoid **stereotyping** that suggests that only certain groups in society have problems with alcohol (older men, persons of lower socioeconomic status, dishevelled people, people with blotchy faces, people drinking alone etc.);
- you avoid **humorous portrayals** of drinking alcohol and drunk people;
- you use portrayals that present the **negative effects of drinking alcohol** (while avoiding showing people).

6. Report respectfully about people with alcohol problems and those close to them.

- Only state the **objective facts concerning an incident**.
- Avoid **stigmatising and marginalising** a group of people. When referring to persons it is better to use **'person-first language'** and not language that designates or labels a person; for instance instead of 'addict', 'alcoholic' or 'excessive drinker', use expressions such as 'person with alcohol dependence syndrome' or 'person who drinks excessively'.
- **Avoid expressions that moralise**, that indicate it is an 'issue of choice', when difficulties relate to alcohol dependence syndrome (since this is in fact a disease).
- **Avoid mockery** that labels a person and sensationalist or stylistically marked headings.
- In introducing a person in a piece (e.g. celebrities), **avoid any statement that this is a person who has or has had problems with alcohol** where this is not necessary or not an essential part of the news item.

7. Use appropriate expressions.

- Do not use expressions that **glorify** drinking or that **ascribe to alcohol a special or positive significance**.
- Do not use expressions **that stigmatise or make fun**, or are not accurate.
- Use expressions that send the message that drinking **any alcohol carries risks**.
- **Explain in an appropriate way** the expressions used in relation to drinking alcohol (e.g. explain the limits of less hazardous alcohol drinking).



8. Do not present alcohol as a medicine for courage, revitalisation and relaxation or as a solution for problems such as stress and insomnia.



- **Do not portray alcohol as a medicine**, since it can harm almost every organ in the body.
- **Do not portray alcohol as a means of solving problems** such as lack of courage, feeling bad, low physical performance, personal distress.
- Instead of recommendations about drinking alcohol, **provide general tips on where to find help** (such as seeing your doctor) and include healthy alternatives to drinking alcohol, which do not harm an individual's health or psychosocial state.

9. Take the opportunity to provide information about where to seek help in cases of difficulty or mental distress due to excessive alcohol drinking.

- Always **encourage people to seek help and include sources of help.**
- ***Do not overlook close relatives;*** also report on what they can do and where they can find help for themselves.
- Sources of help are available at **www.sopa.si** and **www.infomosa.si/pomoc**

10. Take the opportunity to report on positive stories.

- Report on people who **do not drink alcohol.** They should be a good example of how not drinking can be seen as a good choice and not as something unusual (thereby also normalising it).
- Report on the **stories of people who have overcome or are dealing with alcohol problems, and of those close to them.**
- **Positive stories should be diverse,** just as problems with alcohol are diverse.

11. Reporting should be the result of a critical approach to various sources of information.

- Base pieces on **credible and verifiable sources** and reference them.
- Where possible, give the links to primary sources.
- Do not cite unofficial data and non-scientific sources uncritically and do not present them as equivalent to official data from credible institutions.

12. Take the opportunity to open up the space for discussion on attitudes to drinking alcohol.

- Present the **wider context** of the alcohol problem and **prompt the public to think** about their attitude to drinking alcohol.
- Through your pieces, encourage the awareness that **all members of the community play a part** in changing the attitude towards drinking.

HOW TO REPORT ON ALCOHOL: A GUIDE FOR THE MEDIA

Authors: Mag. Tadeja Hočevar, Dr Pika Založnik,
Karmen Henigsman, Dr Maja Roškar

Translation: Amidas d. o. o.

Design: Nicha d.o.o.

Published by: National Institute of Public Health,
Trubarjeva 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

Printed by: Tisk Žnidarič

Print run: 150 copies

Place and year of publication: Ljubljana, 2020

Copyright © National Institute of Public Health

Free copy.

All rights reserved. Reproduction in part or whole in any way and by any media without the written consent of the author is prohibited. Violations will be sanctioned in accordance with copyright and criminal law.

Online: www.nijz.si and www.sopa.si

The media help shape our attitude towards alcohol.

The key public health messages based on scientific findings are:

Choose a healthy alternative.

As little as possible or not at all.

There is no safe limit for drinking alcohol.

Drinking any alcohol carries risks.