

Nova Scotia higher than national average for hospitalizations because of alcohol: report



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A new national report shows that more Canadians end up in emergency rooms because of the over-consumption of alcohol than for heart attacks – Jun 22, 2017

The number of people in Nova Scotia hospitalized because of alcohol in 2016 ranked higher than the national average, according to a new report from the Canadian Institute of Health Information, and it's also the only province east of Manitoba to do so.

Canada's average is 239 hospitalizations caused entirely by alcohol for every 100,000, but in Nova Scotia that average sits at 309. And while it's not at the same level as the Northwest Territories — 1,315 — or British Columbia — 349, it's the only province on the eastern side of the country to hit above the national mark.

Nova Scotia's chief public health officer Dr. Robert Strang said there can be many factors that lead to hospitalization.

“In a rural area you're more likely to be hospitalized than in an urban area and that's due to access to care perhaps,” Strang said. “So it's complicated factors, but I think the overall message is ... that even though this is the tip of an iceberg, the over-consumption of alcohol is creating a significant impact on the health-care system.”

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The report says a hospital can see significant costs: “the average cost per hospitalization entirely caused by alcohol was estimated to be \$8,100 — higher than the cost of the average hospital stay.”

As a whole, more than 77,000 Canadians were hospitalized as a direct result of alcohol, according to CIHI.

Strang said the conditions listed in the report of why people were admitted, such as alcohol-induced cirrhosis of the liver, are due to long-term over-consumption of alcohol. But one of the other categories listed as a cause — alcohol intoxication or alcohol poisoning — can be a result of binge drinking.



Canadian Institute for Health Information

The numbers from the report could be considered a difficult pill to swallow, given almost 80 per cent of Canadians drink.

Dr. Sam Campbell, an emergency room doctor in Halifax, says it's become part of people's lives, but like Strang, he said there are two groups of people affected by alcohol.

"There's the person who chronically drinks too much and those people arrive at any time day or night," he said. "On the weekends, it's the people who you talk about, live a normal life and then go out on the weekends and drink too much and fall down and break their arm or get in an argument with someone and break their nose or drive when they shouldn't."

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Both doctors agree, however, that the statistics released in the report may be “the tip of the iceberg.”

Campbell said the report does not touch on those who come into the emergency room because of trauma related to alcohol, for example by breaking their arm as a result of drinking, or “because their lives are falling apart.”

He added that with alcohol-related hospitalizations occurring more than the number of people in hospital for heart attacks, it raises added concern.

In Strang’s opinion, several conditions regarding alcohol, such as intoxication, can lead to injuries.

“Motor-vehicle crashes, falls, fights, a whole range of things that aren’t a part of this report,” he said.

“More of them are due to episodic drinking and let alone the social community impacts that binge drinking carries.”

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With Nova Scotia’s statistics 29 per cent higher than the national average, Strang said decreasing that number can come down to government policy. This can include how alcohol is priced, how accessible it’s made and whether alcohol should be sold under a public or private model.

“There are a number of policy issues which are at the heart of the challenges that this report presents and from my perspective, should be calling us to step back and have a ‘sober second look’ at some of the ways we have allowed alcohol to appear and the policy framework around it in our society,” Strang said.

Strang and Campbell also say what’s clear from the report is that it’s a “wake-up call” and that though there are some aspects missing, like alcohol-related injuries, it’s still good data to have.

“Now we have a measure that we can track over time and ... there could be one measure that we look at and see if we’re making a difference,” Strang said.

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Campbell added: “Everybody’s worried about having a heart attack, few people are worried about their liver failing.”