

LCQ11: Alcoholic beverages and related diseases

Following is a question by the Hon Lam San-keung and a written reply by the Secretary for Health, Professor Lo Chung-mau, in the Legislative Council today (July 10):

Question:

It has been over 16 years since the Government abolished its duties on wine and liquor with an alcoholic strength of not more than 30% in 2008. Regarding alcoholic beverages and related diseases, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) of the changes in the alcohol consumption per capita of Hong Kong in recent years compared with that in 2008;
- (2) whether it has studied if the alcohol consumption per capita of Hong Kong in recent years is higher than neighbouring regions; and
- (3) whether it has studied if there is any clear sign that the abolition of duty on liquor has led to an increase in the number of cases of Hong Kong people suffering from alcohol-related diseases, and of the details of the findings of the relevant study?

Reply:

President,

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), harmful use of alcohol is a significant risk factor for more than 200 diseases, injuries and other health conditions. Harmful use of alcohol is associated with the risk of developing a range of health problems such as mental and behavioural disorders (including alcohol dependence), and major non-communicable diseases (NCDs) (e.g. liver cirrhosis and some cancers). In addition to health effects, the harmful use of alcohol can place a heavy burden on individuals, families and society at large. The WHO recommends that governments of various places should strengthen their responses to reduce alcohol-related harm for prevention and control of NCDs.

In 2018, the Government launched the "Towards 2025: Strategy and Action Plan to Prevent and Control Non-communicable Diseases in Hong Kong", setting out nine local targets, with "Reduce harmful use of alcohol" being one of them, to be achieved by 2025. The Government will continue to adopt a risk-based approach to reduce alcohol-related harm, in particular alcohol dependence, alcohol abuse, binge drinking, etc., through publicity, education, treatment and support services, as well as other appropriate measures (e.g. spirits tax).

In consultation with the Financial Services and the Treasury Bureau and

the Department of Health (DH), the reply to the question raised by the Hon Lam San-keung is as follows:

(1) Alcohol consumption per capita (APC) (in litres of pure alcohol) is closely related to the prevalence of alcohol-related harms and alcohol dependence at the population level. The APC in Hong Kong is calculated by adding the volume of locally produced alcohol and imported alcohol, minus the volume of the export of locally produced alcohol and re-export alcohol, divided by the population aged 15 years or above in Hong Kong. However, the estimation may be affected by many factors, such as stockpiling and consumption level of tourists visiting Hong Kong.

The local APC rose from 2.53 liters in 2005 to 2.87 liters in 2017, up by less than 10 per cent in 12 years. Between 2019 and 2022, Hong Kong's APC showed a downward trend, with 2.45 liters in 2020 and 2.29 liters in 2022. This downward trend may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and is also in line with the latest Global Status Report released by the WHO, which pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the APC in various parts of the world. Among them, the APC in the Western Pacific Region, in which Hong Kong belongs, dropped by 16.4 per cent from 2019 to 2020.

Apart from monitoring the APC in Hong Kong, the DH also conducts city-wide population health surveys from time to time to understand the health status and health-related behaviours of the Hong Kong population, including drinking behaviours. Details are set out in the table below, and the trends are broadly in line with the above APC estimates.

Population Health Survey	Proportion of population aged 15 or above who had consumed table wine	Proportion of population aged 15 or above who had consumed spirit
2003/04	7.4% (Note 2)	2.6% (Note 2)
2014/15	33.9% (Note 3)	7.5% (Note 3)
2020-22	11.3% (Note 3)	2.7% (Note 3)

Note 1: The duty for wine and liquor of an alcoholic strength of 30 per cent has been waived since February 2008.

Note 2: Had consumed in the past.

Note 3: Had consumed in 12 months preceding the survey.

(2) The APC varies from region to region around the world. When comparing the APC with neighbouring regions, factors to consider include cultural, religious and economic development of various places. As mentioned above, the APC in Hong Kong in 2020 was 2.45 litres. When comparing this figure with the latest figures published by the WHO for the year of 2020 (Hong Kong's figure was not specified in the database), Hong Kong's APC is relatively low in the Western Pacific Region. The APC in Australia, Korea and Japan was 9.7 liters, 7.4 liters and 6.1 liters respectively, which was higher than Hong Kong's 2.45 liters, whereas the APC in Singapore and Malaysia was 1.8 liters and 0.7 liters respectively, which was lower than Hong Kong's 2.45 liters.

(3) In Hong Kong, as in other parts of the world, there is an increasing number of people suffering from NCDs, resulting in ill health, disability and premature death. These NCDs are associated with a number of common behavioral risk factors, including the harmful use of alcohol. In fact, according to data regularly collected by the DH, from 2007 to 2022, there were between 2 000 and 2 600 hospital admissions each year due to alcohol-related illnesses or injuries (including alcoholic liver disease, mental and behavioural disorders due to use of alcohol, accidental poisoning by and exposure to alcohol marked as the principal diagnosis).

Over the years, the DH has been committed to launching public education campaigns on alcohol-related harms, including the "Understanding Alcohol Harm" publicity and education campaign since 2022, to enhance the public's understanding of the health risks associated with alcohol consumption through various channels. Through the "Change4Health – Alcohol and Health" website, the DH disseminates evidence-based information on drinking and health to the public, and provides online risk assessment of drinking behaviour, personalised health advice, self-help tools, health education resources, etc., so as to encourage drinkers to make changes to their drinking behaviour for the sake of their health. The DH has also launched the Pilot Alcohol Cessation Counselling Service through subvention to a non-government organisation, to provide free counselling service for people identified to have probable alcohol dependence.

In respect of primary healthcare services, Life Course Preventive Care is an evidence-based and comprehensive health strategy that emphasises on prevention and personalised needs. It provides guidance on the health needs of citizens across different life stages. Life Course Preventive Care has been implemented in District Health Centres and District Health Centre Expresses to assist citizens to adopt healthy lifestyle, including early identification and intervention of high-risk drinking behaviors through Health Risk Factor Assessment, with a view to enhancing the overall health of the Hong Kong citizens.

The DH is aware that local academic institution has used statistical models to estimate the impact of the policy on the use of alcohol and the health of Hong Kong people, and the findings of the studies have shown that the reduction of alcohol use can alleviate the burden of alcohol-related health problems.

In formulating any revenue measures, the Government will take into account the relevant policy needs, views from various parties, the economic situation of Hong Kong, burden on public finance, as well as the needs of various sectors of the community. Apart from consideration from the angle of public finance, public health is also an important factor to consider, as the duty on liquors remains one of the effective ways to encourage the public to reduce drinking.