



# Age limits in Europe, research and policy update

Maria Neufeld

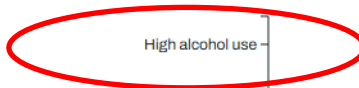
Alcohol, Illicit Drugs and Prison Health Programme

WHO Regional Office

GBD Compare

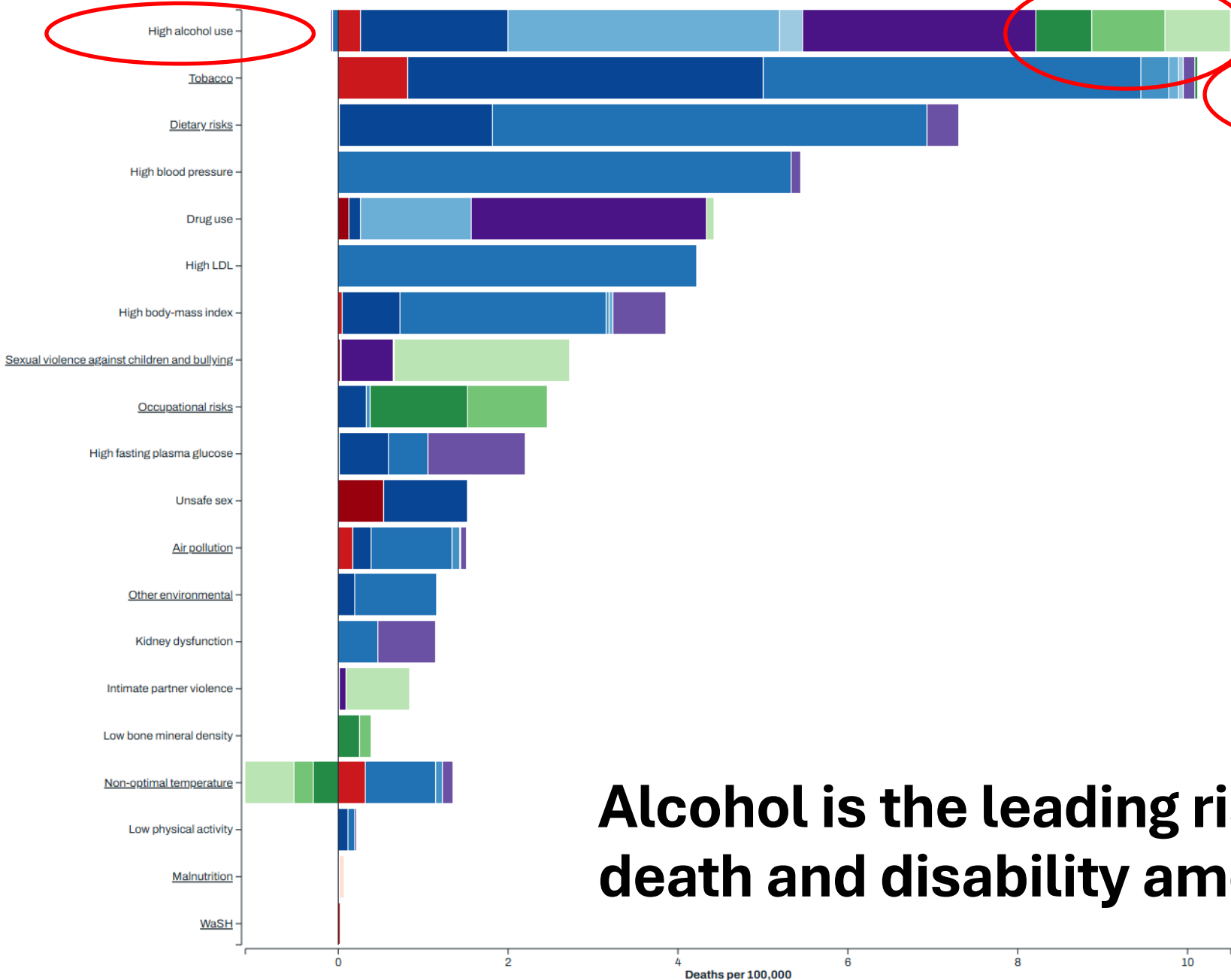
European Union, Both sexes, 15-49 years, 2023

i



Switch cause group  
Add cause

- Self-harm & violence
  - Unintentional inj
  - Transport injuries
  - Other non-communicable
  - Musculoskeletal disorders
  - Sense organ diseases
  - Skin diseases
  - Diabetes & CKD
  - Substance use
  - Mental disorders
  - Neurological disorders
  - Digestive diseases
  - Chronic respiratory
  - Cardiovascular diseases
  - Neoplasms
  - Nutritional deficiencies
  - Maternal & neonatal
  - Other infectious
  - NTDs & malaria
  - Enteric infections
  - Respiratory infections & TB
  - HIV/AIDS & STIs
- Clear selection



**Alcohol is the leading risk factor for premature death and disability among young people**



# Alcohol use is now ranked higher than tobacco in the youngest age group [1990-2023]

INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH METRICS AND EVALUATION

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## GBD Compare

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European Union  
Both sexes, 15-49 years, Deaths per 100,000

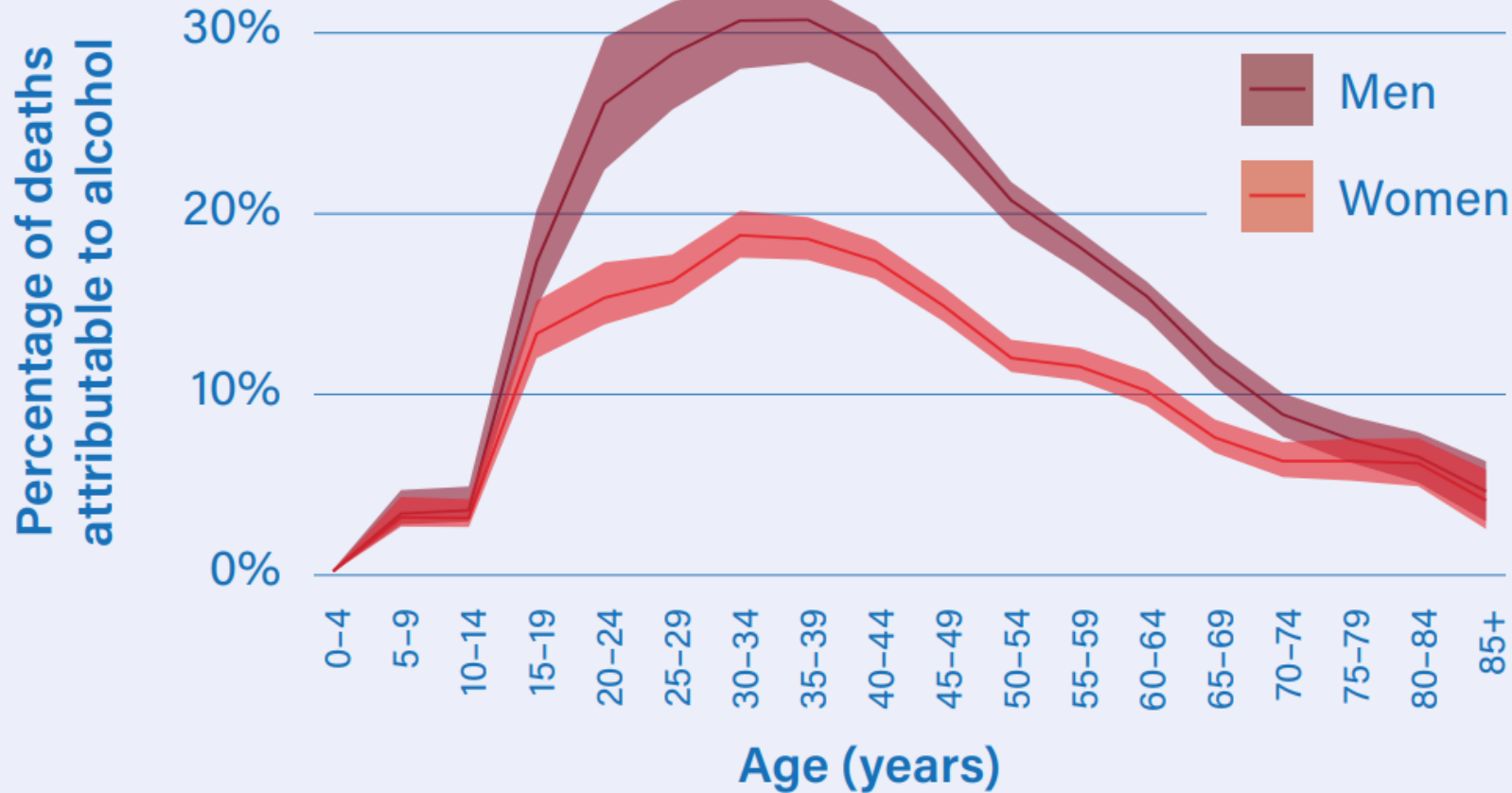
1990 rank

2023 rank



Source: [VizHub - GBD Compare \(healthdata.org\)](https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-compare)

## Proportion of deaths caused by alcohol use, by age and sex (WHO European Region, 2019)



Deaths caused by alcohol in WHO EUR in 2019:

15-19 year olds: **16.0%**  
20-24 year olds: **23.1%**  
25-29 year olds: **25.4%**  
30-34 year olds: **27.4%**  
35-39 year olds: **27.1%**

Mainly due alcohol's contribution to injuries (intentional & unintentional)



Sources: [Alcohol, health and policy response in the WHO European Region in 2019](#)  
WHO Regional Office for Europe (2025). Alcohol-attributable injuries in the WHO European Region: overview of key findings based on 2019 data. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/383872>.



# Why minimum age is a good idea?

**Early initiation of alcohol use → a higher risk of developing alcohol dependence (and other negative outcomes) later in life**

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Minimum legal drinking age and alcohol-attributable morbidity and mortality by age 63 years: a register-based cohort study based on alcohol reform

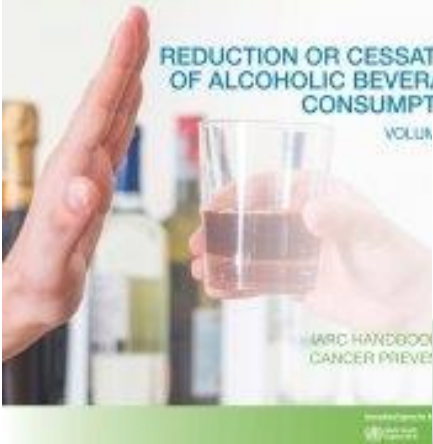
[Juha Luukkonen, MSc](#) <sup>a</sup>   · [Lasse Tarkiainen, PhD](#) <sup>a,b</sup> · [Prof Pekka Martikainen, PhD](#) <sup>a,c,d</sup> · [Hanna Remes, PhD](#) <sup>a</sup>

- In 1969 Finland reduced its legal drinking age from 21 years to 18 years
- Different birth cohorts were able to buy alcohol at different ages (21, 20, 19, and 18 years).
- People who had to wait until later to buy alcohol had lower risks of alcohol-related illness and death compared to those who could get it at 18 (several decades later!)
- **Higher minimum age limits are protective for health beyond young adulthood**

Source: [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpub/PIIS2468-2667\(23\)00049-X.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpub/PIIS2468-2667(23)00049-X.pdf)







# IARC Handbook Volume 20 A&B



-> the most recent evaluation and synthesis of alcohol policies (and link to cancer reduction)



Alcohol Policy		Strength of the Evidence	
		Sufficient	Inadequate
 <b>TAX</b>	<b>Tax and Price Policies</b>		
	Excise and sales tax	✓	
	Minimum pricing	✓	
	Bans on discounting		✗
 <b>21+</b>	<b>Availability Policies</b>		
	Outlet density	✓	
	Days or hours of sale	✓	
	Minimum purchase or drinking age	✓	
	Total bans on sales	✓	
	<b>Marketing Policies</b>		
	Strong alcohol marketing bans	✓	
 	<b>Coordinated Multiple Alcohol Policy Interventions</b>	✓	



# WHO definitions minimum age

## Indicator name:

Alcohol age limits, on-premise sales (“minimum drinking age”)

## Definition:

The legal age limit for on-premise service of alcoholic beverages is defined as the age at which a person ***can be served alcoholic beverages on premises*** in a country, i.e. alcoholic beverages cannot be served to a person under this age.

## Indicator name:

Alcohol age limits, off-premise sales (“minimum purchasing age”)

## Definition:

The legal age limit for off-premise sales of alcoholic beverages is defined as the age at which a person ***can be sold alcoholic beverages off premises*** in a country, i.e. alcoholic beverages cannot be sold to a person under this age.



# Main changes minimum age 2012-2022 in WHO EUR

Country	2012						2016						2019						2022					
	On-premises			Off-premises			On-premises			Off-premises			On-premises			Off-premises			On-premises			Off-premises		
	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Beer	Wine	Spirits	Beer	Wine	Spirits
Austria*	16	16	16/18	16	16	16/18	16	16	18	16	16	18	16	16	18	16	16	18	16	16	18	16	16	18
Cyprus	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	17	18	18	18	18	18	18
Kazakhstan	18	18	18	18	18	18	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21
Lithuania	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
Netherlands	16	16	18	16	16	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18
Portugal	16	16	18	16	16	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18
Spain*	16	16	16	16	16	16	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18
Sweden	18	18	18	18	20	20	18	18	18	18	20	20	18	18	18	20	20	20	18	18	18	20	20	20
Turkmenistan	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	21
Uzbekistan	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20

- 10 out of 53 Member states reported minimum age increases (exception Sweden: artefact of reporting)
- Earlier differentiation by beverage type disappears in several countries: Netherlands and Portugal move from 16 (beer/wine) vs 18 (spirits) to one age (18) for everything
- Austria reduces differentiation by moving spirits to 18 but keeps beer/wine at 16
- Shift toward higher minimum ages in Kazakhstan (21), Turkmenistan (21) and Lithuania (20)

## Sources:

World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe (2014). European status report on alcohol and health 2014: availability of alcohol. World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/350746>

World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe. <https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/350746>

Global Information System on Alcohol and Health. <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/global-information-system-on-alcohol-and-health>

# Where minors are allowed to buy & consume in 2022

- Austria (beer/wine 16)
- Belgium (beer/wine 16)
- Denmark (off-premises beer/wine 16)
- Germany (beer/wine 16)
- Luxembourg (all beverages 16)
- Malta (all beverages 17)
- Portugal (beer/wine 16)
- San Marino (all beverages 16)
- Switzerland (beer/wine 16)
- United Kingdom\* (on-premises beer/wine 16)

# Where minors are allowed to drink in 2022

## Explicit supervised drinking (legal)

### Germany

- 14–15: beer/wine allowed **with parents (even in public)**
- Clear legal model of supervised drinking

### United Kingdom

- Drinking allowed **at home under parental supervision**
- Limited public case (16–17 with meals)

### Ireland

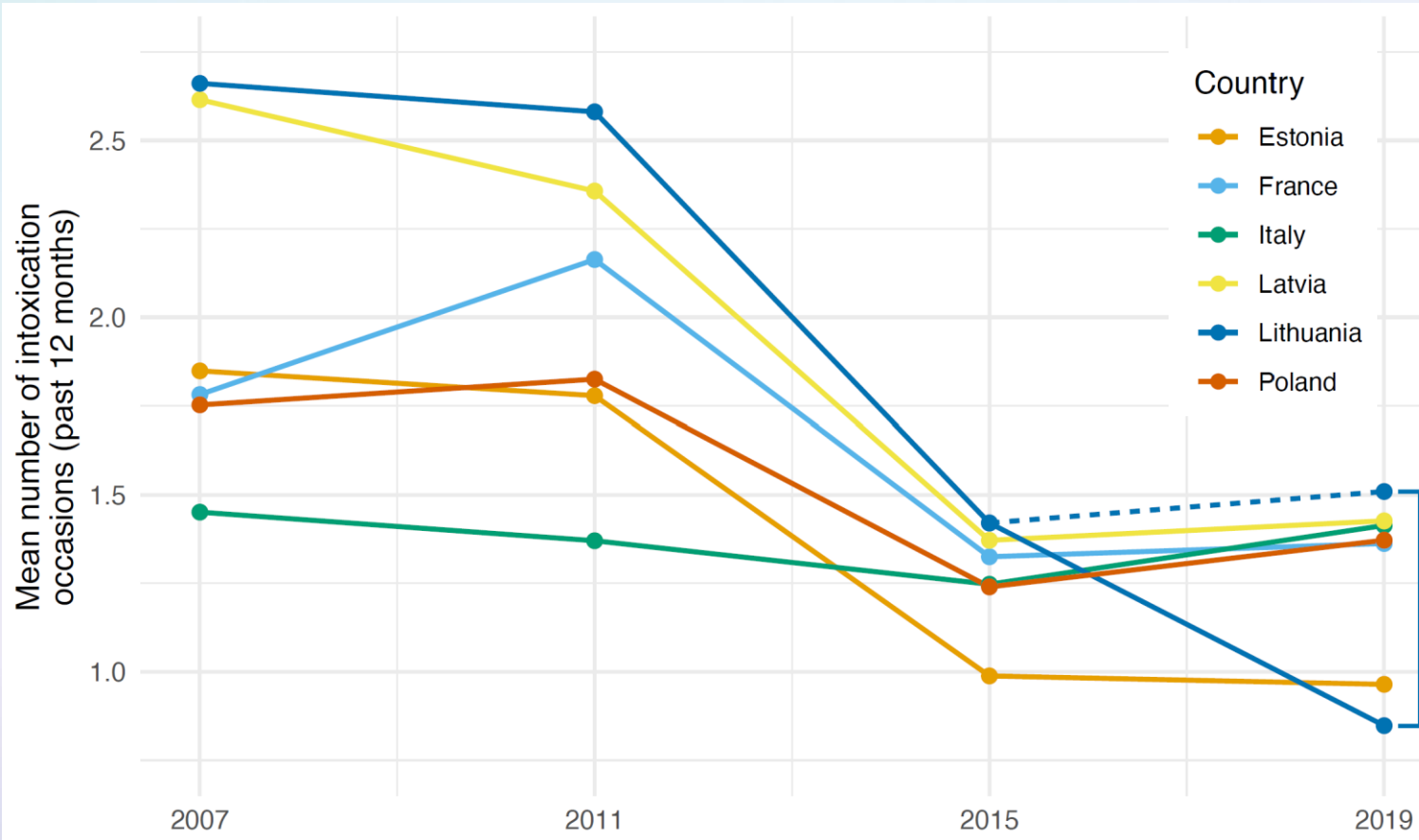
- Explicitly allowed **in private with parents**

- Supervised drinking as a teenager predicts alcohol misuse & impaired driving & riding with an impaired driver later in adulthood.
- Poor family management practices (i.e. lack of monitoring and clear rules) predicts alcohol-related harms in adulthood.
- Adverse effects were similar in Australia and US

[Longitudinal associations between adult-supervised drinking during adolescence and alcohol misuse from ages 25–31 years: A comparison of Australia and the United States](#)



# The impact of the 2018 full alcohol marketing ban on adolescent drinking: evidence from Lithuania



- A full marketing ban was associated with a 35% reduction in adolescent intoxication frequency (IRR = 0.65, 95% CI: 0.56–0.77), after adjustment for secular trends and other alcohol control measures.
- Reductions were also observed for binge drinking (–18%) and alcohol consumption (–12%)

Without the ban, intoxication in Lithuania would have been nearly 40% higher in 2019!



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*Marking 40 years of the Ottawa Charter  
in the WHO European Region*



**Thank you**  
for your attention.

Maria Neufeld



neufeldm@who.int



<https://www.who.int/europe/activities/partnering-with-the-eu-to-reduce-harms-from-alcohol>

<https://www.who.int/europe/health-topics/alcohol>

**evid**action ●

WHO/EU  
Evidence into Action  
Alcohol Project

