

# PROBLEMATIC ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION DAMAGING EUROPE'S ECONOMIES

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*Problematic alcohol use is responsible for annual productivity losses of 74 billion euros across the EU, according to experts at the European Health Forum Gastein. Flexible, cost-effective screening and brief intervention (SBI) measures that are easy to implement in workplaces can help to identify and treat alcohol-related illness.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 2 October 2013** . Problematic alcohol use does not only cause serious damage to personal health . it also has a debilitating effect on Europe's economy. A significant mental health problem, problematic alcohol consumption is responsible for productivity losses of around 74 billion euros annually within the European Union. Sick leave and absenteeism resulting from harmful alcohol consumption have become an enormous burden on the economy,+said Don Shenker, Director of the UK-based Alcohol Health Network, today at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). Mental health as a fundamental component of a healthy economy and a driver of growth is one of the main points on the agenda at this year's EHFG.

Resilient and Innovative Health Systems for Europe+is the slogan for this year's EHFG. More than 550 participants from some 45 countries are attending Europe's most important health policy conference in Bad Hofgastein to exchange views on key issues affecting European health systems.

## Up to 25 % of employees in large companies affected

Figures from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) show just how widespread alcohol-related problems are in working life, and demonstrate their impact on productivity in European businesses. According to the ILO problematic alcohol use affects the health of up to 25 % of staff in major companies. However, strategies aimed at resolving such mental health problems often run into significant obstacles . such as a lack of awareness of the problem among employees, managers and society, or the trivialisation and deliberate concealment of alcohol consumption for fear of the professional consequences, including dismissal and a loss of social standing. The frameworks and instruments needed to recognise alcohol problems at an early stage are frequently lacking,+noted Shenker.

But there is no shortage of effective, easily accessible and cost-effective means of pinpointing alcohol-related problems and their prevalence in the workplace. These include the AUDIT self-assessment questionnaire, a more flexible and standardised international screening test that quickly provides the basis for the targeted application of brief interventions, but which is still underused,+Shenker added. Numerous studies have underlined the effectiveness of standardised SBI measures in highlighting problematic alcohol use. Research carried out in the US has shown that every dollar invested in screening and brief intervention structures for alcohol problems generates a saving of four dollars for companies thanks to a reduction in alcohol-related absenteeism and sick leave.

In Europe over seven percent of all illnesses and premature deaths are attributed to problematic alcohol use, while almost half of the economic costs resulting from alcohol problems are the result of

productivity losses in the workplace. This clearly shows that workplace screening and brief intervention programmes will play a key role in resolving this problem, said Don Shenker. He then went on to call on politicians to make preventing alcohol problems in the workplace a higher priority: Neither EU nor national strategies aimed at reducing alcohol-related problems contain clear recommendations for SBI programmes in the workplace, this needs to be embedded in a new EU strategy on alcohol, he commented.

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