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Federal Health Report Warning of Alcohol Risks Withdrawn Amid Debate Over Dietary Guidelines

Competing studies and industry influence shape uncertainty over future U.S. recommendations on safe drinking levels and public health messaging

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The Department of Health and Human Services has withdrawn a federal report that warned even small amounts of alcohol could increase the risk of cancer and other health problems. The report, known as the Alcohol Intake and Health Study, was prepared by a committee of researchers who found that consuming as little as one drink per day raised the risk of liver cirrhosis, oral and esophageal cancers, and injuries. The authors said they were informed that their final version would not be submitted to Congress as originally planned.

This decision comes as the government prepares to update the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which are revised every five years and influence public health recommendations, school meal programs, and food labeling. The Alcohol Intake and Health Study was one of two major reports intended to inform the new guidelines' recommendations on alcohol consumption. Its early findings were made public in January, but the full draft remained available on the HHS website as of late last week.

Instead, a competing report from a panel convened by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM) is expected to play a larger role in shaping the guidelines. The NASEM report concluded that moderate drinking may reduce overall mortality risk, despite raising the risk for certain cancers such as breast cancer. The panel's findings align with long-standing industry positions that moderate alcohol consumption can be part of a healthy lifestyle. Some members of the NASEM panel have faced criticism for financial ties to alcohol producers.

The NASEM report was commissioned by Congress in 2022 after concerns were raised about whether previous dietary guidelines had underestimated health risks associated with low levels of alcohol consumption. The alcohol industry has consistently opposed efforts to tighten drinking recommendations and has criticized studies linking even moderate drinking to health risks. An advocacy group supported by the industry, Science Over Bias, argued that dietary guidelines should be based on a broad consensus of scientific evidence rather than what it called "the personal ideologies of a handful of researchers."

Last week, Congress took further action by defunding the Interagency Coordinating Committee on the Prevention of Underage Drinking (ICCPUD), which had been tasked by the Biden administration with evaluating adult alcohol consumption. Critics argued that ICCPUD's committee lacked sufficient expertise in adult health and included several Canadian addiction specialists. After these concerns were raised in 2023, Congress asked NASEM to prepare its own review using a larger group of experts from various medical fields.

The withdrawal of the Alcohol Intake and Health Study marks a setback for advocates who have pushed for stricter warnings about alcohol's health risks. It also represents a victory for wine producers, restaurants, and other businesses that rely on alcohol sales. Tom Wark, executive director of the National Association of Wine Retailers, said that maintaining recommendations for moderate drinking is important for both public health messaging and business stability.

The future content of the new dietary guidelines remains uncertain. In May, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. told lawmakers that new guidelines would be released before August and would be much shorter than previous versions. However, no new guidelines have been published yet. Reports have circulated suggesting that the updated guidelines may not include specific recommendations about safe levels of alcohol consumption.

The U.S. Dietary Guidelines are widely referenced by consumers seeking information about healthy drinking limits. Current standards recommend no more than one drink per day for women and two for men. Efforts during the Biden administration to change these standards included calls for warning labels on alcoholic beverages, but those proposals have not advanced.

As policymakers continue to debate how best to communicate risks associated with alcohol use, businesses in the wine and spirits sector are watching closely for any changes that could affect consumer behavior or regulatory requirements. The next version of the Dietary Guidelines is expected by the end of 2025, but it remains unclear what stance they will take on alcohol consumption or whether they will address it at all.