About 4,600 lives in England could be saved by reducing alcohol intake to just half a unit a day, say experts. The Oxford University report warned that alcohol consumption is a risk factor for many chronic diseases.

The government recommends that men drink no more than three to four units per day and women no more than two to three.

But the current guidelines are "not compatible with optimum protection of public health", the researchers said. Ill health linked to alcohol is estimated to cost the NHS in England £3.3bn every year.

The Oxford University team used data from the 2006 General Household Survey looking at weekly drinking patterns of 15,000 adults in England. The researchers used a mathematical model to study death rates from 11 illnesses known to be linked to long-term alcohol use, the British Medical Journal reported. These included coronary heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver, epilepsy and five cancers.

Dr Melanie Nichols, lead author of the paper, said: "Over 4,000 deaths from cancer, heart disease, stroke and liver disease in England could be prevented if drinkers reduced their average level of alcohol consumption to half a unit per person per day - a level much lower than current UK government recommendations.

"Half a unit of alcohol is as little as a quarter of a glass of wine, or a quarter of a pint."

But the researchers said they were not trying to lecture people, just give them the information so they could make an informed decision.They added there was a widespread belief that alcohol protects against heart disease.

Alcohol Concern chief executive Eric Appleby said that government guidelines must offer the public a realistic way of reducing the risks associated with drinking.

"As alcoholic drinks have started to vary in strength we use 'units' to measure alcohol intake but it can be very difficult for people to understand what this means in practical terms."

But Henry Ashworth, chief executive of the Portman Group, which also represents UK drinks producers, said; "78% of people in the UK drink within recommended low risk guidelines - as set by the chief medical officers.

"Drastically cutting everyone's consumption to half a unit a day (ie one large glass of wine a week) is not the way to reduce harms in the smaller groups who are misusing alcohol and need specific and targeted help"

Source: Emily Selvadurai, Health reporter, BBC News