

# Factsheet: Alcohol - the Irish situation

May 2024

## Table of Contents

**Table of Contents ..... 1**

Glossary of terms..... 2

What does alcohol do?..... 3

What is a standard drink in Ireland? ..... 3

What are the low-risk drinking guidelines in Ireland? ..... 3

How do we know how many people use alcohol in Ireland?..... 3

How much alcohol do Irish people consume? ..... 3

Health-related harms ..... 4

How many people receive treatment for alcohol use?..... 5

Problem alcohol use ..... 5

Alcohol-related deaths ..... 6

What impact has alcohol on crime in Ireland?..... 7

What does the law say about alcohol? ..... 7

References..... 8

## Glossary of terms

**Alcohol use disorder (AUD)** – defined according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) criteria. It is a maladaptive pattern of alcohol use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by 2 or more of the following 11 criteria occurring at any time in the last 12 months: role impairment; hazardous use; social problems; tolerance; withdrawal; longer or more use than intended; unsuccessful attempts to quit/cut down; much time spent using alcohol; reduced activities because of drinking; continued drinking despite psychological or physical problems; and alcohol cravings.

**Heavy episodic drinking (HED)** – sometimes referred to as ‘binge drinking’ and defined as consuming six or more standard drinks on a single occasion. This is approximately equivalent to three pints of beer or cider, six pub measures of spirits, or just under one bottle of wine.

**Last month prevalence** – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported using a named drug in the 30-day period prior to the survey. Last month prevalence is often referred to as current use. A proportion of those reporting current use may be occasional (or first-time) users who happen to have used in the period leading up to the survey. It should therefore be noted that current use is not synonymous with regular use.

**Last year prevalence** – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported using a named drug in the year prior to the survey. Last year prevalence is often referred to as recent use.

**Lifetime prevalence** – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported ever having used the named drug at the time they were surveyed. A person who records lifetime prevalence may or may not be currently using the drug. Lifetime prevalence should not be interpreted as meaning that people have necessarily used a drug over a long period of time or that they will use the drug again in future.

**Prevalence** – refers to the proportion of a population that has used a drug over a particular time period.

## What does alcohol do?

Alcohol is a psychoactive substance with dependence-producing properties. Consumption of alcohol and problems related to alcohol vary widely around the world, but the burden of disease and death remains significant in most countries. The harmful use of alcohol is one of the leading risk factors for population health worldwide and has a direct impact on many health-related targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including those for maternal and child health, infectious diseases (HIV, viral hepatitis, tuberculosis), noncommunicable diseases and mental health, injuries and poisonings.<sup>1</sup>

## What is a standard drink in Ireland?

The standard drink in Ireland is 10 grams of pure alcohol.<sup>2</sup>

Below are some examples of a standard drink.

- A pub measure of spirits (35.5ml)
- A half pint of normal beer
- An alcopop (275ml bottle)
- A small glass of wine (12.5% volume)

A bottle of wine at 12.5% alcohol contains about seven standard drinks.

## What are the low-risk drinking guidelines in Ireland?

Low risk weekly guidelines for adults are:<sup>2</sup>

- up to 11 standard drinks in a week for women, and
- up to 17 standard drinks in a week for men.

See more at [Health Service Executive](#)

## How do we know how many people use alcohol in Ireland?

Every four years a survey of the general population takes place to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use alcohol and other drugs.<sup>3</sup> Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+ normally resident in households in Ireland. This type of survey is not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households, such as prisoners or hostel dwellers.<sup>3</sup> (For other populations, see our [prevalence sources](#).)

Drug prevalence surveys were undertaken in 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, and 2014–15. These surveys were commissioned on an all-island basis by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol in the Republic of Ireland, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland.

The most recent survey 2019–20 National Drug and Alcohol Survey (NDAS), which took place in the Republic of Ireland, was managed by the Health Research Board.

## How much alcohol do Irish people consume?

The 2019–20 NDAS survey involved 5,762 people in Ireland.<sup>3</sup> The latest survey estimates show a decrease in the lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of alcohol use in the general population:

**Table 1: Lifetime, last year and last month trends in alcohol use among 15–64-year-olds (%)**

	2002/03	2006/07	2010/11	2014/15a	2019/20
Lifetime	90.1	90.2	90.3	85.3*	83.0*
Last year	83.8	84.2	85.3	79.9*	77.7
Last month	73.9	73.2	70.6*	65.0*	65.3

\* Significant change ( $p < 0.05$ ) in prevalence when compared with prevalence reported in the previous survey.

The NDAS findings show that:<sup>3</sup>

- 74.2% of respondents reported having consumed alcohol in the last 12 months (defined as recent drinking), corresponding to 2,904,000 of the general population in Ireland aged 15 years and older.
- The proportion of the adult population aged 15–64 years who have consumed alcohol in the last year has decreased since the 2002–03 survey, from 83.8% to 77.7% in 2019–20.
- The median age at which 15–24-year-olds initiated alcohol consumption has increased from 16 years to 17 years since 2002–03.
- One-third (34.1%) of drinkers typically consume at least 6 standard drinks per drinking occasion; this increases to one-half for male drinkers.
- Two-fifths (39.9%) of drinkers engaged in heavy episodic drinking (HED) at least once per month.
- The prevalence of alcohol use disorder (AUD) in the general population was found to be 14.8%, corresponding to 578,000 adults in Ireland.
- Young males are most likely to have hazardous or harmful drinking patterns. Among male drinkers aged 15–24 years, 63.1% engage in monthly HED and 37.0% have AUD.

Per capita alcohol use is the volume of pure alcohol consumed per person aged 15 years and over each year and is calculated in Ireland using alcohol sales data from Revenue and population estimates from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). In 2023, per capita alcohol use for the population aged 15 years and over was 9.9 litres of pure alcohol this corresponds to 37 bottles (700 millilitres (mL)) of vodka, 104 bottles (750mL) of wine, or 400 pints of beer (with an alcohol by volume (ABV) concentration of 4.3%).<sup>4</sup>

See more alcohol data from [Revenue quarterly excise receipts and volumes](#) and [annual report 2022](#). See also factsheets for each Community Healthcare Organisation ([CHO areas](#)) with information on drug and alcohol prevalence and treatment.

## Health-related harms

In Ireland, the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry](#) (HIPE) scheme collects data on discharges (including deaths) from acute Irish hospitals.

All alcohol-related discharges, either wholly attributable (alcohol is a necessary cause for these conditions to manifest) or partially attributable (alcohol must be a component cause), were analysed.

According to [HIPE](#) data<sup>5</sup>, alcohol-related hospitalisations between 2018–2022 show an overall national decline of 4.5%. Kildare, Carlow and Roscommon saw the largest increase in all alcohol-related hospitalisations and Longford, Kerry and Cavan saw the largest decreases in all alcohol-related hospitalisations. When all alcohol-related hospitalisations were applied to the population as per the Census 2022, Donegal had the highest rate of all alcohol-related hospitalisations per 100,000 of the population, followed by Louth and Sligo. Leitrim had the lowest rate per 100,000 of all alcohol-related hospitalisations.

Alcohol-related liver disease hospitalisations increased by 3.3%.<sup>5</sup> When ALD hospitalisations were applied to the population as per the Census 2022, Tipperary had the highest rate of ALD hospitalisations per 100,000 of the population, followed by Westmeath and Cork. Clare had the lowest rate of ALD hospitalisations per 100,000 of the population.

The [National Registry of Deliberate Self-Harm](#) is a national system of population monitoring for the occurrence of deliberate self-harm, established by the National Suicide Research Foundation. In 2021 the NSHRI recorded 11,415 presentations to hospital as a result of self-harm. 3 in every 10 presentations involved alcohol (26% for females and 36% for males).<sup>6</sup>

### How many people receive treatment for alcohol use?

The [National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#) (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> The National Psychiatric Inpatient Reporting System (NPIRS) provides detailed information on all admissions and discharges to inpatient psychiatric services in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Between 2021 and 2022, the number of treated cases increased by 8.2%, from 6,859 cases to 7,421 cases following a period of decline between 2016 and 2020.<sup>7</sup>

Of the 7,421 cases in 2022 who reported alcohol as their main problem drug:

- 3,278 (44.2%) were new cases.
- 4,469 (60.2%) were treated in outpatient facilities
- 4,565 (61.5%) were men.
- 76 (1.0%) were aged under 18 years.
- Polydrug use (problem use of more than one substance) was reported by almost one-quarter 1,796 (24.2%) of cases. This was an increase from 23.7% in 2021.
- The number of polydrug cases reporting cocaine as an additional problem increased by 134.7% between 2016 and 2022, increasing from 35.4% in 2016 to 61.4% of polydrug cases in 2022.

**Table 2: Number of cases treated for alcohol as a main problem, by treatment status, NDTRS 2016 to 2022**

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<b>All cases</b>	7643	7350	7464	7546	5824	6859	7421
<b>New Cases</b>	3678 (48.1)	3500 (47.6)	3230 (43.3)	3296 (43.7)	2490 (42.8)	3026 (44.1)	3278 (44.2)
<b>Previously treated cases</b>	3783 (49.5)	3652 (49.7)	3705 (49.6)	3400 (45.1)	3170 (54.4)	3596 (52.4)	3868 (52.1)
<b>Treatment status unknown</b>	182 (2.4)	198 (2.7)	529 (7.1)	850 (11.3)	164 (2.8)	237 (3.5)	275 (3.7)

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2022 see library [interactive tables](#)]

### Problem alcohol use

In 2022, the majority 4,848 (65.3%) of all NDTRS cases were classified as alcohol dependent.<sup>7</sup>

- 64.0% of new cases (those who have never been treated for problem alcohol use before) were classified as alcohol dependent.
- The proportion of previously treated cases who were alcohol dependent decreased from 70.0% in 2016 to 68.1% in 2022.
- In 2022, 66.8% of males were alcohol dependent, compared to 63.0% of females.

There has been a considerable decrease in the numbers admitted to psychiatric hospitals for alcohol treatment. The total number of people admitted to psychiatric hospitals with an alcoholic disorder diagnosis in 2022 was 806.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 3. All admissions to psychiatric units and hospitals. Primary admission diagnosis: alcoholic disorders. Ireland 2018 - 2022. Numbers with rates per 100,000 total population.**

	Male	Female	Total
	N (rate)	N (rate)	N (rate)
<b>2022</b>	471 (20.0)	335 (13.9)	806 (16.9)
<b>2021</b>	462 (19.6)	296 (12.3)	758 (15.9)
<b>2020</b>	567 (24.1)	391 (16.2)	958 (20.1)
<b>2019</b>	635 (27.0)	455 (18.9)	1,090 (22.9)
<b>2018</b>	660 (28.0)	426 (17.7)	1,086 (22.8)

Data drawn from [National Psychiatric Inpatient Reporting System annual reports 2019 – 2023](#)

### Alcohol-related deaths

The main sources of information on alcohol-related mortality are the NDRDI and the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) study. The [National Drug-Related Deaths Index \(NDRDI\)](#)<sup>9</sup> is a database which records cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent. The [GBD study](#) quantifies health loss from hundreds of diseases, injuries, and risk factors by combining the prevalence of a given disease or risk factor and the relative harm it causes. It can be used to measure alcohol-related harm, including deaths, and considers a wide range of variables in order to calculate the mortality associated with alcohol use.

According to the NDRDI in 2020 the number of alcohol-only poisonings was 65:<sup>9</sup>

As the NDRDI does not include partially alcohol-attributable conditions, it indicates that on average, three people die every day in Ireland as a direct result of alcohol. The GBD study<sup>4</sup> includes partially alcohol-attributable deaths and estimates that there are at least four deaths per day in Ireland due to alcohol.

The GBD study ranked alcohol use as the eighth leading cause of death among the population in Ireland in 2019, with cirrhosis and other chronic liver diseases due to alcohol use causing the most wholly alcohol-attributable deaths, followed by AUD and liver cancer due to alcohol use. Partially alcohol-attributable deaths in 2019 were most commonly neoplasms, digestive diseases, and cardiovascular diseases. Provisional data from the NDRDI indicate that there were 146 alcohol poisoning deaths in Ireland in 2020.

The data available from the Road Safety Authority and NDRDI conclude that more than one-third of fatal road traffic collisions (RTCs) between 2013 and 2017 involved the road user having a positive toxicology for alcohol. Among driver fatalities with a positive toxicology for alcohol, the drivers were typically male, aged under 45 years.<sup>4</sup>

For more information on alcohol related deaths please see the 2024 overview [Alcohol: availability, affordability, related harm, and policy](#)

## What impact has alcohol on crime in Ireland?

According to the 2024 report *Alcohol: availability, affordability, related harm, and policy in Ireland*:<sup>4</sup>

- In 2022, there were 5,527 recorded incidents of drink-driving (driving or being in charge of a vehicle while over the legal blood alcohol limit).
- There were just 26 incidents of purchasing or consumption of alcohol by those aged under 18 years and 237 liquor licensing incidents (which include the sale of alcohol without a valid licence, and breach of alcohol sales hours).
- A 12.5% increase was noted in the number of incidents for drunkenness, from 8,813 incidents in 2012 to 9,917 in 2022.
- In 2019, the majority of clients on probation supervision (81%) reported misusing alcohol and/or other drugs in their lifetime; 64% of the sample reported any alcohol misuse in their lifetime, 50% of whom reported combined alcohol and drug misuse and 14% of whom reported only alcohol misuse in their lifetime.
  - Clients' drug and/or alcohol use was linked to the offence committed for 42% of male probation service clients and 32% of female clients.
  - Of those who reported being binge drinkers, 61% committed an alcohol-related offence, this was 50% of harmful drinkers (50%) or 35% of dependent drinkers, indicating that binge drinking is particularly associated with criminal behaviour.

## What does the law say about alcohol?

The [Public Health \(Alcohol\) Act 2018](#) seeks to address the negative impacts of consumption on public health. It contains a suite of measures designed to reduce alcohol consumption and limit the damage to the nation's health, society and economy.

The primary policy objectives of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 are to:

- reduce alcohol consumption to 9.1 litres of pure alcohol per person per annum
- delay the initiation of alcohol consumption by children and young people
- reduce the harms caused by the misuse of alcohol
- ensure the supply and price of alcohol is regulated and controlled in order to minimise the possibility and incidence of alcohol related harm

Measures that have been implemented to date include structural separation, the regulation of sports sponsorship, restrictions on certain promotional activities and minimum unit pricing.

Regulations were signed in May 2023 to introduce comprehensive health labelling of alcohol products sold in Ireland. The law provides that the labels of alcohol products will state the calorie content and grams of alcohol in the product. They will warn about the risk of consuming alcohol when pregnant and will also warn of the risk of liver disease and fatal cancers from alcohol consumption. The labels will direct the consumer to the HSE website, [www.askaboutalcohol.ie](http://www.askaboutalcohol.ie), for further information. There is a lead-in time built into the law in order to give businesses significant time to prepare for the change. The law will apply from 22 May 2026.

See more at [Alcohol Action Ireland](#) *What is the public health (alcohol) Act?*

The Road Traffic Act 2006 gave the Gardai the powers to reduce and eliminate the offence of drink driving. See more at [Citizens Information](#)

### Intoxicating Liquor Acts

- It is an offence to sell alcohol to anyone under the age of 18.
- It is an offence to buy alcohol for people under the age of 18.

- It is also an offence to give alcohol to anyone under the age of 18 unless in a domestic home and they have parental consent.

See more at [Citizens Information](#)

## References

1. World Health Organization (2018) [Global status report on alcohol and health 2018](#). World Health Organization, Geneva.
2. Health Service Executive (2022) [Weekly low-risk alcohol guidelines](#). Dublin: Health Service Executive.
3. Mongan D, Millar SR and Galvin B (2021) [The 2019–20 Irish National Drug and Alcohol Survey: main findings](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
4. Doyle A, Mongan D and Galvin B (2024) [Alcohol: availability, affordability, related harm, and policy](#) Dublin: Health Research Board.
5. Doyle, Anne (2023) [Regional alcohol-related harm - County level factsheet](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
6. Joyce, M Chakraborty S, Hursztyn P *et al.* (2024) [National Self-Harm Registry Ireland annual report 2021](#) Cork: National Suicide Research Foundation
7. Condrón, I Lyons S and Carew AM (2023) [National Drug Treatment Reporting System: 2022 alcohol treatment demand](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
8. Daly A and Lynn E (2023) [National Psychiatric Inpatient Reporting System \(NPIRS\) annual report on the activities of Irish psychiatric units and hospitals, 2022](#). Dublin: Health Research Board [NPIRS data tables 2022](#)
9. Health Research Board (2019) [Health Research Board reports latest drug-related deaths figures](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.

### Further resources:

- Doyle, A Sunday, S Galvin B and Mongan D (2022) [Alcohol and other drug use among children and young people in Ireland: prevalence, risk and protective factors, consequences, responses, and policies](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
- Gavin A, Kolto A, Kelly C, Molcho M and Nic Gabhainn S (2021) [Trends in health behaviours, health outcomes and contextual factors between 1998-2018: findings from the Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study](#). Department of Health and National University of Ireland, Galway, Dublin.
- Hope A and Barry J (2016) [Alcohol treatment services in Ireland: how the public view them](#). Dublin: Health Service Executive.

### Useful websites:

- HRB National Drugs Library <http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/>
- Alcohol Action Ireland <http://alcoholireland.ie/>
- Alcohol Forum Ireland <http://www.alcoholforum.org/>

### How to cite this factsheet:

HRB National Drugs Library (2024) Alcohol - the Irish situation. Dublin: HRB National Drugs Library. [www.drugsandalcohol.ie/24954](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/24954)

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### **HRB National Drugs Library – Find the evidence**

[www.drugsandalcohol.ie](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie)

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- Key Irish data resources – treatment, deaths, prevalence, regional data, alcohol links
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- Practitioner portal – specific webpages for those working in the area
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