

Factsheet: Alcohol - the Irish situation

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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.

Drug Prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that has used a named drug during a particular time period. That is, how many people in specific group have used a drug during a specified timeframe.

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 a population 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. Some 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, so current use is not the same as regular use.

Last year prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that reported using a named drug in the 12 months prior to the survey. Last year prevalence is often referred to as recent use.

Lifetime prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that reported ever having used a named drug before 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 used a drug over a long period of time or that they will use the drug again in future.

What does alcohol do?

Depression: Alcohol may make you feel less anxious and improve your mood while you are drinking. But when the effects of the alcohol wear off, you can feel worse than you did before.

Heart: Alcohol can damage the heart or interfere with the way it works if you have:

- a lot of alcohol over a long time
- too much on a single occasion

This can cause different problems, including:

- high blood pressure (hypertension)
- increased risk of strokes
- cardiomyopathy (stretching and drooping of the heart muscle)
- arrhythmias (irregular heartbeat)

Brain

Alcohol interferes with communication pathways in the brain. This causes the loss of control that happens when you are drunk. In the longer term, drinking too much alcohol can damage, shrink or kill brain cells. This can change the way the brain works.¹

What is a standard drink in Ireland?

The standard drink in Ireland is 10 grams of pure alcohol.²

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:²

- 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?

The Healthy Ireland survey is an annual survey designed to increase knowledge of the population's health and health behaviours.³ It is commissioned by the Department of Health, carried out by Ipsos B&A, and conducted with a representative sample of the population of the Republic of Ireland aged 15 years and over. For the 2024 Survey, telephone interviews took place between October 2023 and April 2024 with 7,398 respondents. Questions about alcohol use are routinely asked in each wave of the survey.³

(For other populations, see our [prevalence sources](#).)

How much alcohol do Irish people consume?

According to the Healthy Ireland survey 2024³:

- Seventy-three per cent of the population (75% of males and 71% of females) aged 15 years and over reported consuming alcohol in the previous 12 months.
- Drinking at least once a week was reported by 38% of respondents, see Table 1.
- More than 2 in every 10 drinkers in Ireland drink multiple times per week and this was most commonly reported among those aged 55–64 years (31%).
- When examined by sex, drinking multiple times per week was most commonly reported by females aged 55–64 years (27%) and by males aged 45–54 years (36%).
- Over one-quarter (28%) of the population reported heavy episodic drinking (HED) or binge drinking on a typical drinking occasion.
- There was a substantial gender difference in binge drinking prevalence: males (42%) were more likely to report binge drinking compared with females (12%) and this applies to all age groups.

Table 1: Frequency of drinking - by age (%)

	Total	15-24	24-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Past 12 months	73	75	78	74	77	73	66	57
At least once per month	60	63	62	60	65	63	57	41
At least once per week	38	30	31	33	44	48	43	34
Multiple times per week	22	13	15	18	28	31	28	23

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%).⁴

See more alcohol data from [Revenue quarterly excise receipts and volumes](#) and [annual report 2024](#). See also factsheets for each Community Healthcare Organisation ([CHO areas](#)) with information on drug and alcohol prevalence and treatment.

How many 15–16-year-old students in Ireland use alcohol?

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has conducted surveys of school-going children every four years since 1995, using a standardised method and a common questionnaire (see www.espad.org). The eight survey⁵ was undertaken in 37 European countries during 2024 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 15-16-year-olds about their alcohol use and intoxication in their lifetime, during the last 12 months, and in the last 30 days. The study found that:

- 66.5% of students in Ireland used alcohol in their lifetime (66.1% of male and 67% female).
- 35.1% of students in Ireland used alcohol in last month (33.5% of male and 36.7% female).
- 3.5% of students had consumed five or more drinks once or twice in the last 30 days a further one in ten (9.7%) had done so at least three times.
- Students commonly sourced alcohol from parents (23.2%), from other youth (11.6%) and from a store/off-license (8.3%).
- Students were more likely to report that they use alcohol for the purpose of enjoyment and to enhance social activity.
- 71.4% of students who had skipped class on 5-6 days in the last 30 days were current drinkers.
- Students whose friends all used alcohol were far more likely to have ever tried it (93.7%).

For further information go to the [ESPAD data portal](#) where you can search for “alcohol” and filter by Ireland.

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](#) data⁶, there were 22,572 alcohol-related discharges from Irish hospitals in 2023. HSE Dublin and North East (Area A) had the greatest number of alcohol-related hospital discharges (n=6,181) but this is expected due to the larger population within that area. There were 4,739 alcohol-related hospital discharges in HSE Dublin and Midlands (Area B) followed by 3,638 in HSE Dublin and South East (Area C). When considering the rate of alcohol-related hospital discharges per 100,000 of the population of each regional health area, the highest rate remained as HSE Dublin and North East (Area A) at 520.7 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 2023 the NSHRI estimate 12,792 presentations made by 9,786 individuals to hospital as a result of self-harm. Alcohol was involved in 30% of all presentations and was more often involved in male than female presentations (37% and 25% respectively).⁷

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.^a When someone in treatment has been using multiple drugs, one is identified as their ‘main problem’ drug.⁸

^a The NDTRS contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number in continuous care. Note: Cases are episodes of treatment not individuals, which means there is a possibility that individuals appear more than once in the data; for example, where a person receives treatment at more than one centre, or at the same centre more than once in a calendar year.

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, see Table 2.⁸

Of the 8,163 cases in 2023 who reported alcohol as their main problem drug:

- 3,625 (44.4%) were new cases.
- 4,983 (61.0%) were treated in outpatient facilities
- 5,203 (63.7%) were men.
- 62 (0.8%) were aged under 18 years.
- Polydrug use (problem use of more than one substance) was reported by more than one in five 2,032 (24.9%) of cases.
- The number of polydrug cases reporting cocaine as an additional problem increased by 115.8% between 2017 and 2023, increasing from 603 cases in 2017 to 1,310 cases in 2023.

Table 2: Number of cases treated for alcohol as a main problem, by treatment status, NDTRS 2017 to 2023

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
All cases	7,350	7,464	7,546	5,824	6,859	7,421	8,163
New Cases	3,500 (47.6)	3,230 (43.3)	3,296 (43.7)	2,490 (42.8)	3,026 (44.1)	3,278 (44.2)	3,625 (44.4)
Previously treated cases	3,652 (49.7)	3,705 (49.6)	3,400 (45.1)	3,170 (54.4)	3,596 (52.4)	3,868 (52.1)	4,527 (52.1)
Treatment status unknown	198 (2.7)	529 (7.1)	850 (11.3)	164 (2.8)	237 (3.5)	275 (3.7)	281 (3.4)

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2023 see library [interactive tables](#)]

Problem alcohol use

In 2023, the majority 4,976 (61.0%) of all NDTRS cases were classified as alcohol dependent.⁸

- 57.4% 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 78.5% in 2017 to 65.3% in 2023.

The [National Psychiatric Inpatient Reporting System](#) (NPIRS) provides detailed information on all admissions and discharges to inpatient psychiatric services in Ireland.⁹ 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 alcohol-related disorder diagnosis in 2023 was 606.

Table 3. All admissions to psychiatric units and hospitals. Primary admission diagnosis: alcoholic disorders. Ireland 2018 - 2023. Numbers with rates per 100,000 total population.

	Male	Female	Total
	N (rate)	N (rate)	N (rate)
2023	385 (15.1)	221 (8.5)	606 (11.8)
2022	471 (20.0)	335 (13.9)	806 (16.9)
2021	462 (19.6)	296 (12.3)	758 (15.9)

	Male	Female	Total
2020	567 (24.1)	391 (16.2)	958 (20.1)
2019	635 (27.0)	455 (18.9)	1,090 (22.9)
2018	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)¹⁰ 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 2021 the number of alcohol-only poisonings was 65, and 4 in 5 (79.7%) of these deaths were among males. The median age of the deceased was 56.5 years.¹⁰ In 2021, 155 alcohol-related poisoning deaths were recorded. The majority of these were among males (112, 72.3%).

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 study⁴ 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.⁴

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*:⁴

- 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. 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](#)

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Further resources:

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- 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/>

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