

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.

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.¹

What is a standard drink in Ireland?

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

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:

- 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.² 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.² (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.² 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:²

- 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.

Data released by Revenue: provisional alcohol clearances and receipts 2019 indicates that Ireland's alcohol consumption remains high at 10.78 litres per capita.³ Alcohol receipts for the year ending 2019 show a 0.05% decline, however when an estimated population data for 2019 is applied (CSO: population >15 years old – 3,912.6m) the figures for consumption, as a per capita, stand at 10.78 litres, indicative of a small but encouraging reduction – 2.13%, year on year.

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.

The number of people discharged from hospital whose condition was wholly attributable to alcohol rose by 94.8% between 1995 and 2018, from 9,420 to 18,348. Males accounted for 73.8% of these discharges and females 26.2%.³

According to HIPE data, during the period 2007–2016, there were 33,794 discharges with a diagnosis of alcoholic liver disease (ALD), increasing by 38% from 2,563 discharges in 2007 to 3,532 discharges in 2016. The data indicated that the majority of ALD discharges during the period 2007–2016 were male (70%) and the mean age of admissions increased from 51 years in 2006 to 54 years in 2016. Patients with ALD remained in hospital for an average of 13 days; the data indicated that an average of 120 hospital beds per day were occupied due to ALD, equating to a cost of €34 million annually.⁵

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 2020 the NSHRI recorded 12,465 presentations to hospital as a result of self-harm. 3 in every 10 presentations involved alcohol (28% for females and 36% for males).⁴

What harms are experienced in the Irish population due to others' drinking?

A national dedicated Alcohol Harm to Others (AH2O) population survey of the Irish adult population aged was conducted during the second half of 2015.⁵

The research examined three key dimensions of AH2O – harm from others' drinking, the burden on those around the drinker and the financial burden of alcohol harms from others.

Using a 12-month time frame, respondents were asked about a variety of harms experienced as a result of someone else's drinking across a range of interactions or relationships in a person's life.

Key findings from the report:

- One in six carers (16%) reported that children, for whom they had parental responsibility, experienced harm because of someone else's drinking.
- One in every two people (51%) reported experiencing harm due to strangers' drinking in the past 12 months.
- Two in every five people (44%) reported experiencing negative consequences due to the drinking of people they know.
- Three in every five people (61%) reported having a known heavy drinker in their life.
- One in seven workers (14%) reported work-related problems due to co-workers' drinking.
- The total estimated cost of AH2O as assessed in this survey was €872.75 million.

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.⁶ The National Psychiatric Inpatient Reporting System (NPIRS) provides detailed information on all admissions and discharges to inpatient psychiatric services in Ireland.⁷

Between 2015 and 2021 50,304 cases were treated for alcohol as a main problem, with 5,824 cases during 2020.⁶ In 2020, there was an overall drop in the number of cases entering drug treatment which in part was the result of temporary service closures and measures introduced to comply with Covid-19 restrictions. This does not necessarily indicate a real decline in demand for treatment.

Of the 6,859 cases in 2021 who reported alcohol as their main problem drug:

- 3,026 (44.1%) were new cases.
- 4,183 (61.0%) were treated in outpatient facilities
- 4,297 (62.6%) were men.
- 109 (1.6%) were aged under 18 years.
- 1,628 (23.7%) used alcohol with other drugs (polydrug use).

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2020 see library [interactive tables](#)]

Problem alcohol use

In 2021, the majority 4,522 (65.9%) of all cases were classified as alcohol dependent.⁶

- 62.3% 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 increased from 66.7% in 2015 to 70.2% in 2021.
- In 2021, 67.7% 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 diagnosis decreased by 60.6% between 2006 and 2019, i.e. from 2,767 to 1,090.⁷

How many people die from alcohol poisoning in Ireland?

The [National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) (NDRDI) is a database which records cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent.

Alcohol was the single most common drug implicated in poisoning deaths and was implicated in 33% of all poisoning deaths in 2017:⁸

- Alcohol-related deaths have decreased by 9%, from 138 in 2016 to 125 in 2017.
- Alcohol alone was responsible for 16% (n=61) of all poisoning deaths in 2017.
- 51% (n=64) of deaths where alcohol was implicated involved other drugs, mainly opioids.

Alcohol-related mortality in Ireland

During the period 2008 to 2017, a total of 10,803 alcohol-related deaths were recorded, accounting for 3.7% of all deaths in Ireland during this time. There were 8,000 male and 2,803 female deaths, accounting for 5.4% of all male deaths and 2.0% of all female deaths.³

What impact has alcohol on the Irish economy?

According to the report Alcohol in Ireland: consumption, harm, cost and policy response:³

- In 2013, alcohol-related discharges accounted for 160,211 bed days in public hospitals; that is 3.6% of all bed days that year; compared to 56,264 bed days or 1.7% of the total number of bed days in 1995.
- €1.5 billion was the cost for alcohol-related discharges from hospital. That is equal to €1 for every €10 spent on public health in 2012. This excludes the cost of emergency cases, GP visits, psychiatric admissions and alcohol treatment services.
- An estimated 5,315 people on the Live Register in November 2013 had lost their job due to alcohol use.
- The estimated cost of alcohol-related absenteeism was €41,290,805 in 2013.

What does the law say about alcohol?

The [Public Health \(Alcohol\) Act 2018](#) aims to reduce alcohol consumption in Ireland to 9.1 litres per person per annum by 2020 and to reduce the harms associated with alcohol. The Act consists of 29 sections and includes five main provisions. These are: minimum unit pricing; health labelling of alcohol products; the regulation of advertising and sponsorship of alcohol products; structural separation of alcohol products in mixed trading outlets; and the regulation of the sale and supply of alcohol in certain circumstances.

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

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

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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5. Doyle, Anne (2022) [Rising alcoholic liver disease hospital admissions and deaths in Irish hospitals, 2007–2016: a retrospective cross-sectional analysis](#). Drugnet Ireland, Issue 81, Spring 2022, p. 17
6. Lynch, T O’Neill D and Lyons S (2022) [National Drug Treatment Reporting System 2015 – 2021 alcohol data](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.
7. [Mental Health statistics](#) HRB National Psychiatric In-patient Reporting System. Central Statistics office, Cork
8. Health Research Board (2019) [National Drug-Related Deaths Index 2008 to 2017 data](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.

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 <http://www.alcoholforum.org/>

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