

Factsheet – Alcohol: the Irish situation

July 2019

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 ranks among the top five risk factors for disease, disability and death throughout the world. Drinking alcohol is associated with a risk of developing such health problems as alcohol dependence, liver cirrhosis, cancers and injuries.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 the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol (NACDA) and the Northern Ireland Public Health Information and Research Branch (PHIRB) commission a survey of the general population to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use drugs and alcohol.² Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+^a normally resident in households in Ireland and Northern 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

How much alcohol do Irish people consume?

The 2014/15 survey involved 9,505 people (7,005 in Ireland and 2,500 in Northern Ireland). The

^a In the most recent survey 2014/15 the sample population was extended from 15-64 years to include all those aged 15 and over.

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 prevalence of alcohol use in the general population

	2002/03 %	2006/7 %	2010/11 %	2014/15 ^a %
Lifetime	90.1	90.2	90.3	85.3
Last year	83.3	84.0	85.3	79.9
Last month	73.9	73.2	70.6	65.0

The results for Ireland showed that:²

- 62.1% of Irish adults have consumed alcohol in the past month, with past year and lifetime usage at 77% and 82.8% respectively.
- Lifetime (89.2%) and past year (83.3%) usage of alcohol is highest amongst those aged 35 to 44.
- Last year use of alcohol is highest amongst males aged 25-34 years (86.4%) and females aged 35-44 years (81.7%).
- Males across all age groups report higher last month usage of alcohol when compared to females within the same age range.

Alcohol consumption in Ireland increased during 2016, according to provisional figures released by the Revenue Commissioners.³ The figures show that per capita alcohol consumption was 11.46 litres of pure alcohol per person aged 15+ in 2016, an increase of 4.8% from 2015, when it was 10.93 litres. [See more at [Alcohol Action 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.

The number of people discharged from hospital whose condition was wholly attributable to alcohol rose by 82% between 1995 and 2013, from 9,420 to 17,120. Males accounted for 72% of these discharges and females 28%.⁵

There has also been a steady increase in the average length of stay for hospital discharges associated with alcohol, from 6.0 days in 1995 to 10.1 days in 2013, which suggests that patients with alcohol-related diagnoses are becoming more complex in terms of their illness.

Alcoholic liver disease (ALD) was the most common chronic alcohol disease, accounting for approximately four-fifths of all alcohol-related chronic diseases in 2013. The rate of discharges with ALD increased from 28.3 per 100,000 adults aged 15 years and over in 1995 to 87.7 in 2013, an increase of 210%.⁵

Analysis of data from the [National Cancer Registry of Ireland](#) found that between 2001 and 2010, of the 24,995 cases of breast cancer, 3,058 (12.2%) were attributable to alcohol. Of the 6,601 women

who died of breast cancer, 695 (10.5%) cases were attributable to alcohol.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 2017, alcohol was involved in 31% of all cases. Alcohol was significantly more often involved in male episodes of self-harm than female episodes (33% and 29%, respectively).⁶

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 2015.⁷

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^b. The [National Psychiatric Inpatient Reporting System](#) (NPIRS) provides detailed information on all admissions and discharges to inpatient psychiatric services in Ireland.

Between 2011 and 2017 55,675 cases were treated for problem alcohol use, with 7,350 cases during 2017.⁸

Of the 7,350 cases in 2017 who reported alcohol as their main problem drug:

- 3,500 (47.6%) were new cases.
- 3,894 (53%) were treated in outpatient facilities
- 4,769 (64.9%) were men.
- 122 (1.5%) were aged under 18 years.
- 1,452 (19.8%) used alcohol with other drugs (polydrug use).

Problem alcohol use

^b The NDTRS contains information only on cases who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number of cases in continuous care.

In 2017, almost two thirds (72%) of *all* cases were classified as alcohol dependent.⁸

- Three out of five (66.8%) *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 68% in 2011 to 79% in 2017.
- In 2017, 74% of males were alcohol dependent, compared to 68% 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 60.7% between 2006 and 2018, i.e. from 2,767 to 1,086.⁹

How many people die from using alcohol?

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 over the reporting period (2004-2016) and was implicated in 32% of all poisoning deaths in 2016:¹⁰

- Alcohol-related deaths have increased by 18%, from 2015 (n=112) to 2016 (n=132).
- Alcohol alone was responsible for 16% (n=55) of all poisoning deaths in 2016, up from 13% in 2015.
- Alcohol-related deaths: 58% (n=77) in 2016 involved other drugs, mainly opiates.

What impact has alcohol on the Irish economy?

According to the report *Overview of alcohol consumption, alcohol-related harm and alcohol policy in Ireland*:⁵

- 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 \(Alcohol\) Bill 2015](#) 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 Bill 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](#) *Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015: Main Measures*.

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](#)

For more information on alcohol please refer to the following sources:

1. World Health Organization. (2014) [Global status report on alcohol and health 2014](#). World Health Organization, Geneva.
2. National Advisory Committee on Drugs & Public Health Information and Research Branch (2016) [Prevalence of drug use and gambling in Ireland & drug use in Northern Ireland](#). Bulletin 1. Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol.
3. Alcohol Action Ireland (2017) [Ireland's per capita alcohol consumption increased in 2016](#). Dublin: Alcohol Action Ireland.
4. Taylor, Keishia and Babineau, Kate and Keogan, Sheila and Whelan, Ellen and Clancy, Luke (2016) [ESPAD 2015: European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs in Ireland](#). Dublin: Department of Health.
5. Mongan, Deirdre and Long, Jean (2016) [Overview of alcohol consumption, alcohol-related harm and alcohol policy in Ireland](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
6. Griffin, Eve and Arensman, Ella and Corcoran, Paul and Dillon, Christina B and Williamson, Eileen and Perry, Ivan J (2018) [National Self-Harm Registry Ireland annual report 2017](#). Cork: National Suicide Research Foundation.
7. Hope, Ann and Barry, Joseph and Byrne, Sean (2018) [The untold story: harms experienced in the Irish population due to others' drinking](#). Dublin: Health Service Executive.
8. Health Research Board. (2019) [Alcohol Treatment in Ireland 20011 to 2017](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.
9. [Mental Health statistics](#) HRB National Psychiatric In-patient Reporting System. Central Statistics office, Cork
10. Health Research Board (2019) [National Drug-Related Deaths Index 2004 to 2016 data](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.

Further resources:

Gavin, Aoife and Keane, Eimear and Callaghan, Mary and Molcho, Michal and Kelly, Colette and Nic Gabhainn, Saoirse (2015) [The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children \(HBSC\) study 2014](#).

Department of Health and National University of Ireland, Galway, Dublin.

Hope, Ann and Barry, Joseph and Byrne, Sean (2018) [The untold story: harms experienced in the Irish population due to others' drinking](#). Dublin: Health Service Executive.

Hope, Ann and Barry, Joseph (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/>

How to cite this factsheet:

HRB National Drugs Library (2019) *Alcohol: the Irish situation*. HRB National Drugs Library, Dublin www.drugsandalcohol.ie/24954

Other Factsheets in this series:

[Cannabis: the Irish situation](#)

[Cocaine: the Irish situation](#)

[Opiates: the Irish situation](#)

[Sedatives and tranquillisers: the Irish situation](#)

[Young people, drugs and alcohol: the Irish situation](#)

HRB National Drugs Library – Find the evidence

www.drugsandalcohol.ie

- Quick updates – newsletter & Drugnet Ireland
- Summaries – Factsheets & Annual national reports
- Policy – Policy page & Dail debates
- International research on interventions – Evidence resources
- Publications of key organisations – HRB, EMCDDA
- Explanations of terms and acronyms – Glossary
- Treatment data – Drug data link (or HRB publications)
- Alcohol diary data
- Search our collection – basic and advanced (you can save your results)

HRB National Drugs Library

Health Research Board

Grattan House 67-72 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

t +353 1 2345 175

e drugslibrary@hrb.ie w www.drugsandalcohol.ie