# HRB reports continued demand for alcohol treatment

Embargo Tuesday 28 July 2020 at 00.01 The latest figures from the Health Research Board (HRB) show 53,200 cases were treated for problem alcohol use in Ireland between 2013 and 2019. A total of 7,546 cases were treated in 2019, a slight increase from 7,464 in 2018.

* Seven-in-ten cases1 are already alcohol dependent2 when seeking treatment.
* Many cases in treatment had been drinking more in a typical day than is recommended in a week based on HSE low risk guidelines3.
* There is a steady increase in the number of cases presenting with problem use of cocaine as an additional drug, from 458 in 2013 to 844 in 2019.

According to Dr Mairead O’ Driscoll, Chief Executive at the HRB,

‘Alcohol continues to be the most common drug that people in Ireland seek treatment for. The report today highlights high levels of alcohol dependence when people first seek treatment, as well as differences by gender and age. By monitoring addiction treatment trends over time, the Health Research Board provides solid evidence that can help inform more targeted approaches to reduce harm and support recovery among people who need alcohol treatment.’

Commenting on these latest figures from the National Drug Treatment Reporting System, Dr Suzi Lyons, Senior Researcher at the HRB says,

‘HRB figures show that the majority of cases are already dependent on alcohol when they present to treatment. Seven-in-ten cases are seeking help when their alcohol use is already severe which makes treatment more complex and recovery more difficult.’

‘We are also seeing men and women presenting for treatment who were drinking more in a typical *day* than would be recommended by the HSE in an entire *week* for low risk drinking. Women typically drank 15 standard drinks on a typical day, while men drank 20 standard drinks on a typical drinking day. Evidence shows that the social and health risks from alcohol increase the more you drink.’

‘One-in-five cases in treatment also report problem use of other drugs along with alcohol. What our data shows is there has been a significant rise in the number of alcohol cases that also report problem cocaine use. This is of particular concern because mixing cocaine and alcohol can result in greater physical harm and more severe side-effects. Over the same period, the number of cases reporting cannabis, benzodiazepines and opioids as additional problem drugs has been declining since 2013.’

# Level of problem alcohol use

* A total of 53,200 cases were treated for problem alcohol use between 2013 and 2019.
* In 2019, there was a small increase in the number of cases, from 7,464 in 2018 to 7,546 in 2019.
* More than 5,100 cases were classified as alcohol dependent in 2019, an increase of 16% from 4,450 in 2013.
* The median number of standard drinks4 consumed on a typical drinking day was 15 for women and was 20 for men.
* Similar to previous years, the median age at which cases first started drinking was 16 years.

# Mixing drugs

* In 2019, a total of 1,570 of cases treated for problem alcohol use reported problem use of another drug. Mixing drugs was reported by one-in-five cases each year since 2013.
* Cannabis was the most common additional drug used, with 881 cases reporting problem use of cannabis in 2019, a decrease from 1,008 in 2013.
* Cocaine was the second most common additional drug used, with 844 cases in 2019, an increase from 458 in 2013.
* Benzodiazepines were the third most common additional drug, with 342 cases in 2019, a decrease from 424 in 2013.
* Opioids as an additional problem drug were reported by 206 cases in 2019, a decrease from 236 in 2013.

# Socio-demographic characteristics

* Similar to previous years, the median age of cases entering alcohol treatment in 2019 was 41 years.
* Almost two-in-three cases were men.
* Just under half of all cases were unemployed
* The number of cases who were homeless increased from 507 in 2013 to 654 in 2019.
* The number of cases recorded as Irish Traveller in ethnicity increased from 144 in 2013 to 178 in 2019.
* The number of under 18-year-olds presenting for treatment has decreased, from 220 in 2013 to 107 in 2019

# A focus on gender

* Similar to previous years, the median age of treated cases was higher for women (43 years) than for men (40 years).
* One-in-three women entering alcohol treatment were aged 50 years or over, compared to one-in-four men.
* The preferred types of alcohol varied by gender. Preferred drinks for men were beer (43%) of cases), spirits (37%) and wine (9%), whereas preferred drinks for women were wine (35%), and spirits (35%) followed by beer (19%).
* Cannabis was the most common additional drug reported by both men and women, followed by cocaine.
* The use of benzodiazepines and opioids as additional drugs was more common among women than men.
* Men were twice as likely to be homeless than women.

A copy of the HRB Bulletin Alcohol Treatment in Ireland 2013–2019 and related infographic is available in the publications section of our website [link]

**ENDS**

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1 It is important to note that each record in the National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS) database relates to a treatment episode (**a case**), and not to a person. This means that the same person could be counted more than once in the same calendar year if they had more than one treatment episode in that year.

**2 Alcohol dependence:** Strong desire to consume alcohol, impaired control over use, persistent drinking in spite of harmful consequences, a higher priority given to alcohol than any other activities or obligations, increased tolerance and showing withdrawal reaction when alcohol use is discontinued. Source WHO: The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (2001).

3 **Low risk drinking guidelines** from the HSE say up to 11 standard drinks in a week for women, and up to 17 standard drinks in a week for men. That is half a pint of regular beer, 100 mls of wine or a pub measure (35mls) of spirits. Drinks should be spaced out over the week, with two to three alcohol free days per week.

4 **What is a standard drink?**In Ireland a Standard Drink contains 10 grams of pure alcohol.  For example, one Standard Drink is equal to a half pint of normal beer, a small glass of wine (12.5% in volume) or a pub measure of spirits (35mls) [**www.askaboutalcohol.ie/your-drinking/weekly-low-risk-drinking-guidelines/**](https://www.askaboutalcohol.ie/your-drinking/weekly-low-risk-drinking-guidelines/)

**Notes for editors**

This paper describes trends in treated problem alcohol use in Ireland over the seven-year period 2013 to 2019, as recorded by the National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS). This information will assist policy makers, service planners and public health practitioners to develop appropriate responses to problem alcohol use in the future.

The Health Research Board (HRB) is the lead agency supporting and funding health research in Ireland. We manage four health information systems in the areas of alcohol and drug use, drug deaths, disability and mental health and generate evidence to inform health policy. Our aim is to improve people's health, build health research capacity and underpin developments in health service delivery.