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Barometer 2024 and public knowledge of facts regarding the HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines

Introduction

The Barometer has now been conducted by Ipsos B&A on behalf of Drinkaware on nine different occasions over the last seven years, namely January 2017, June 2017, January 2018, April 2019, April 2020, May 2021, June 2022, July 2023 and July 2024. We also conducted a Drinkaware Index in conjunction with Ipsos B&A in 2018 that comprehensively analysed hazardous drinking in Ireland and was published in May 2019. Pre-COVID-19 data is important in highlighting factors that precede changes in drinking patterns. Collectively, extensive data gathered since the commencement of the Barometer series in 2017 allows for an annual examination of drinking practices over time and how they relate to other practices within daily life. However, we cannot examine alcohol in isolation as there is a multi-dimensional aspect to both society's and/or people's relationship with alcohol. There are multiple powerful social, economic, and environmental determinants of alcohol usage/experience. This study, therefore, also examines the 'wider picture' in which adults experience 2024, e.g., stress/tension, mental health, household dynamics, as well as the behaviour of other adults.

Given the very low levels of awareness of the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines (LRWGs) reported in previous Barometers (for instance, only 2-3% of adults correctly identified the HSE LRWGs for men or women in the 2020 Barometer), our research was widened to provide further probing from 2021 with additional questions added on the topic from 2022 onwards to enable deeper insights.

Drinking within the HSE Low Risk Weekly Alcohol Guidelines reduces your risk of alcohol-related health issues. These guidelines are for adults. There is no safe amount of alcohol for children and young people under age 18. The HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines for adults are:

- Women: Less than 11 standard drinks (110g pure alcohol) spread out over the week, with at least two alcohol-free days

- Men: Less than 17 standard drinks (170g pure alcohol) spread out over the week, with at least two alcohol-free days per week
- Common examples of a standard drink are, half a pint of beer, 100ml glass of wine and 35.5ml of spirits.

Hazardous drinking is defined as when a person drinks over the recommended low-risk weekly drinking guidelines. It is also possible to drink hazardously by binge drinking (six or more standard drinks in one sitting), even if the drinking guidelines are adhered to. Health problems directly related to alcohol may not have been experienced yet, but there is an increasing risk of experiencing problems in the future.

Alcohol guidelines are typically set by the Department of Health in each country. If you see unit content displayed on a can or bottle label, this will show the alcohol content in a UK unit, not an Irish standard drink. For people in Ireland, the result will be an underestimation of how much alcohol has been consumed. This means that you may be drinking more than the low-risk guidelines without realising. An Irish standard drink and UK unit are not the same.

One UK unit contains 8 grams of pure alcohol, compared to 10 grams in one Irish standard drink.

Further details on the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines are available here:

<https://www.drinkaware.ie/facts/low-risk-weekly-alcohol-guidelines>

Following the planning phase and decisions regarding specific questioning, in June 2024, Drinkaware commissioned Ipsos B&A to undertake its latest in the series of national surveys - Barometers - examining Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol. The objective of this specific study was to examine Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol in the unique context of 2024. This study also sought to examine some of the key determinants of the public's attitudes and behaviours regarding alcohol, and the 'wider picture' of adults' experiences in Ireland in 2024 e.g., post COVID-19 pandemic, current cost of living crisis stress/tension, mental health, economic impact, household dynamic as well as the behaviour of other adults. Ultimately, the main objectives of the research were to understand the *who, what, where, when, how and why* of drinking among adults in Ireland in 2024.

A quantitative research design was employed. A quota-controlled sampling procedure was utilised to deliver a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults aged 18+ (n = 1,045). Online surveys were conducted July-August 2024. Information gathered was broken down further by both age cohort (18-24 year, 25-34 years, 35-49 years, 50-64 years, 65+years) and life stage (single -45, single 45+, pre-family, family pre-school, family pre-teen, family teen,

empty nester) allowing for further examination of the impacts for different age and household types in the unique context of post COVID-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis. Questionnaire design incorporated internationally recognised question models including:

- AUDIT-C (Babor et al. 2001)
- Drinking Motive Questionnaire: Revised Short Form (DMQ-R SF) (Kuntsche & Kuntsche, 2009)
- Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009)

The focus of this paper is to provide an outline of the specific findings relating to public knowledge of facts regarding alcohol, notably data on the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines that we identified in our latest Barometer¹. Last year, we published a comprehensive paper that provides a detailed overview of the findings from the [2023 Barometer](#) as well as summary paper focusing specifically on [Wellbeing](#). We are looking forward to continuing to share more findings from our 2024 Barometer in future research papers over the coming months.

Findings

HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines:

- HSE low-risk weekly guidelines are considered ‘reasonable’ by close to half of all adults². 48% of adults believe that the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines for men were reasonable, while 46% of adults believe that the guidelines for women were reasonable. However, both figures represent a slight fall compared with 2023, when at that time, 50% of adults in 2024 believed that the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines for men were reasonable, while 49% of adults believed that the guidelines for women were reasonable.
- Among men, 51% believe that the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines for men are reasonable in 2024; while among women, 45% believe that the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines for women are reasonable.
- Nearly 1 in 2 Irish adults (46%) would follow the guidelines if they were aware of them in 2024 - This rises to 50% of women reporting they would do so (vs 42% of men). The overall 2024 figure is a decrease from the peak of 50% of adults who reported they would

¹ In line with previous years, it is envisaged that the full data table and library of Barometer data since COVID-19 will be available to those wishing to view further details. We welcome secondary analysis of this data following permission and completion of a declaration. Please contact research@drinkaware.ie for more information.

² Participants were shown the HSE LRWGs for both men and women and then asked in their view, did they think that they were reasonable.

in 2023 (47% in 2022, 42% in 2021). Across all adult age cohorts, 18-24-year-olds are most likely to report that they would follow the guidelines if aware of them, peaking at 56%.

- There is a clear interest and appetite growing towards healthier drinking behaviour in 2024 as 45% of those adults who have drunk in the past 30 days (48% in 2023, 46% in 2022, 40% in 2021) say they would follow the guidelines if they were aware of them. In addition, just over 1/3 of adults (34%) who binge drank in the past 30 days in 2024 say that they would follow the guidelines if aware of them (39% in 2023, 34% in 2022, 28% in 2021). Yet only 45% of those who said they would like to drink less often said they would follow them if aware (51% in 2023, 46% in both 2022 and 2021).
- In contrast, 29% of adults in 2024 state they would *not* follow the guidelines if they were aware of them (28% in 2023, 30% in 2022 and 36% in 2021), while 25% don't know.
- Unwillingness to follow the guidelines if aware peaks among some cohorts - for instance, 35% of men (vs 24% women), rising to 43% for those that scored 5+ on the AUDIT-C³, 39% any binge drinker and 35% weekly+ drinking.

Table 1 Would you follow the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines if aware, 2024 (n=1045)

	Total	Gender		Frequency		Any Binge	Would like to drink less often	Alcohol consumption increase 12 months
		Male	Female	Drank last 30 days	Weekly+			
Yes	46%	42%	50%	45%	40%	34%	45%	45%

- Only 30% of adults report being aware of the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines prior to participating in this survey, rising to 35% among weekly+ drinkers and 36% of those who report any binge drinking in the past 30 days.

³ The AUDIT tool, developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Babor et al 2001), is used to measure an individual's level of risk and/or harm in relation to their alcohol consumption patterns. The AUDIT-C was completed in the Barometer 2024 based on consumption in the last 30 days. It is a modified, three question version of the AUDIT instrument used to provide a measure of consumption only. A score of less than 5 indicates lower risk drinking and scores of 5+ AUDIT-C positive, a classification that indicates a propensity to increasing, or hazardous, drinking.

- However, there remains almost no national awareness of what the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines actually are. Less than 5% of adults mention the correct number of drinks for men or women - 2% for men (3% in 2023, 3% in 2022) and 4% for women (3% in 2023, 3% in 2022 (with no improvement on previous years).
- Interestingly, nearly half of men and women expect the maximum standard drinks to be lower than the actual guidelines state, with both slightly lower than was reported in 2024. For instance, 50% (55% in 2023) of adults expect that the guidelines for men are lower than 17, while 46% (51% in 2023) expect the guidelines for women are lower than 11.
- Following on from further additions made in 2022 and repeated in 2023, we again asked questions relating to public attitudes surrounding the guidelines in 2024 but found a slight year-on-year decrease surrounding such. For example, nearly two thirds of adults agree with the statement the guidelines should vary by age (62% in 2024 vs 67% in 2023) and gender (63% in 2024 vs 66% in 2023), representing a 4-5-point year-on-year decrease for each (62% for both respectively in 2022). There is a peak in agreement among 18-24-year-olds that the guidelines should vary for different age groups (75% reporting such in 2024). It is important to reiterate that the guidelines are determined by medical professionals. Nearly half of all adults (47%) agreed that the guidelines should be adapted to a daily format in 2024 (a decrease compared to 2023 at 51% and 2022 at 52%).

Awareness of Health effects of excessive drinking

Participants were shown a list of negative effects from drinking alcohol over the recommended levels on both short and long-term health and asked which they were aware of prior to the survey. The negative effects listed were in line with those on the Drinkaware website. In line with the previous two years, liver disease remains the health effect most prominently associated with excessive drinking in 2024 with 89% adults citing their awareness (86% in 2023, 84% in 2022). Women are more likely to cite awareness of liver disease with 94% doing so (compared with 85% of men). Across age cohorts, adults aged 50+ are most likely to cite awareness of liver disease with 93% of 50-64-year-olds and 95% 65+ year olds doing so. Five other effects are recognised by at least two thirds of adults in 2024, namely impaired judgement (72%), depression (70%), dehydration (69%), disturbed sleep (68%) and headache (68%).

- Introduced to the Barometer 2023 and again in 2024, participants were also asked to ‘spontaneously’ list any short/long-term health effects of alcohol that they can think

of. In so doing providing insight into awareness (*or lack thereof*) of such negative effects. Overall spontaneous awareness rates were lower, while liver disease remains the most cited health effect by over half of adults (57%) (56% in 2023). This is followed by almost a quarter of adults (24%) who referred to brain fog/memory loss/mental health (25% in 2023). Only 15% of adults refer to heart disease and stroke (14% in 2023) and 15% refer to cancer (13% in 2023), while 6% adults cite depression (6% in 2023). Adults spontaneously cited a range of other negative effects that were **not** on the list of negative effects provided - such as obesity (9%), high blood pressure (4%), hangover (4%), kidney disease (5%), effect relationships (6%), and addiction (6%).

- At spontaneous level, foetal disorders during pregnancy registered almost no mentions, while over half of adults (55%) cite their awareness of it from the list of negative health effects provided, peaking among 66% of women.

Supports for moderating drinking

Participants were provided with a number of options and asked which they would find helpful to be more aware of/improve how they manage the amount of alcohol they drink (see table 2 below).

- In line with the previous three years, clear information on what is meant by a standard drink and the maximum number of drinks per week (LRWGs) was the top preference with 30% of adults in 2024 (29% in 2023, 32% in 2022, 31% in 2021). This is followed by a device to monitor blood alcohol levels (24%) and no or low-alcoholic drinks (23%). 23% of adults considered a drinks calculator as helpful. This was closely followed by 21% of adults citing an app to monitor drinking, 20% for both a measuring cup with indications of what a standard drink is and
- Among those who would like to drink alcohol less often, the weekly guidelines and an app for measuring blood alcohol levels are considered the tools and techniques which would be most helpful, with 30% or more of this cohort agreeing with these options as helpful in 2024. In addition, statistically significant peaks are reported in 2024 among those who would like to drink alcohol less often and the following options: an app to monitor drinking (27%), drink-free time periods (23%) and professional assistance e.g. dietician, GP, therapy, specialist etc (17%).

Table 2 Tools and techniques for moderating drinking, 2024 (Base ever drink alcohol n=940)

Tool/technique	Overall % 2024	Overall % 2023	Overall % 2022	Overall % 2021	Would like to drink less often 2024
Clear information on what is meant by a standard drink and the maximum number an adult should drink in a week (LRWGs)	30%	29%	32%	31%	33%
A device to monitor blood alcohol levels	24%	24%	24%	23%	30%
An app to monitor drinking	21%	23%	23%	24%	27%
A drinks calculator	23%	22%	23%	26%	26%
A public health info campaign	20%	22%	21%	22%	21%
No or low alcoholic drinks	24%	22%	25%	n/a	24%
A measuring cup that indicates what is meant by a standard drink	20%	21%	21%	24%	23%
Signage of HSE LRWGs at retail outlets at point of purchase	18%	18%	19%	21%	17%
Drink free periods (such as Dry January)	17%	16%	17%	n/a	23%
Information booklet containing advice tips on cutting down	12%	14%	11%	12%	15%

Digitally accessible/online resources and info	13%	13%	15%	13%	16%
Professional assistance e.g. dietician, GP, therapy, specialist etc.	12%	12%	10%	n/a	17%
A pen/paper drinks diary	4%	6%	5%	5%	5%
Other	1%	2%	1%	2%	0%
Nothing, just my own efforts	27%	27%	29%	30%	18%

Conclusion

Data gathered in the Barometer 2024 study and presented in this paper provides insight into a range of significant issues relating to the HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines and public knowledge on facts relating to alcohol that has now been collected over the course of several years. To change behaviour, people need knowledge, motivation and capacity. The HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines are an obvious starting point.

However, as demonstrated in this paper there remains no national awareness of the alcohol guidelines. Interestingly, about half of men and women expect the maximum standard drinks to be lower than the actual guidelines state. Overall, nearly half of Irish adults would now follow the guidelines if they were aware of same. However, unwillingness to follow the guidelines if aware, peaks among cohorts that may have a higher risk such as men, binge drinkers, weekly+ drinkers and those with an AUDIT-C 5+ score and hence requires urgent need for tailored information and support in order for guidelines to benefit those at highest risk.

UK research found that while awareness of the revised UK low-risk guidelines was high, knowledge of the actual guidelines remains poor - with only 1/ 4 drinkers in the UK accurately recalling the recommended weekly limit (Jackson et al. 2023). In addition, disadvantaged groups such as those with lower education qualifications as well as those from lower social grades were found to be less likely to be either aware or know the guidelines. Odds of both awareness and knowledge were also higher among drinkers aged over 35 years and/or females (Jackson et al. 2023).

Ultimately, there is a potential danger if adults are drinking in the home and unintentionally drinking more. A key example of this is binge drinking, with 25% of drinkers identified in Barometer 2024 as engaging in binge drinking when they drink (drink 6 or more standard drinks) on a typical day in the past 30 days. Similarly, Healthy Ireland 2024 identified a quarter (28%) of the population aged 15+ are considered binge drinkers, i.e. they drank 6 or more standard drinks on a typical drinking occasion in the past 12 months (DoH 2024). In addition, in our 2024 Barometer 50% of Irish adults that consumed alcohol in the past 30 days had scores of 5+ AUDIT-C positive, a classification that indicates a propensity to increasing, or hazardous, drinking (Babor et al. 2001). Evidence gathered through the AUDIT-C offers a

crucial warning system including several concerning peaks with propensity to increasing or hazardous drinking among males (61%), those who drink weekly+ (62%), 61% among those who agree they ‘would like to drink alcohol less often’, and 83% among those who have binge drank in the past 30 days in the 2024Barometer.

An additional concern arises when there is a serious lack of understanding of the HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines - as evident once again in our 2024 Barometer with less than 5% of adults demonstrating accurate knowledge of the guidelines for men or women. This is despite high levels of *self-belief* in understanding of alcohol terms reported⁴ (for instance, 84% adults *believe* that they have a clear understanding of the term ‘standard drink’, while 86% *believe* that have a clear understanding of the term ‘binge drinking’ and yet less than 5% actually demonstrated accurate knowledge. Worryingly, we know from pre-COVID-19 research that Irish adults *do not associate* binge drinking with at-home drinking even if they are unknowingly doing so while at home (Drinkaware 2020).

The weekly low-risk alcohol guidelines in Ireland were last assessed in 2015 following a review commissioned by the HSE. According to the Health Research Board (HRB) (2024), the HSE low-risk alcohol consumption guidelines are now dated, considering the WHO’s advice and renewed evidence highlighting the risks associated with the consumption of even small quantities of alcohol. The HRB (2024) therefore notes that a revision of the low-risk guidelines is warranted, and the introduction of mandatory health warning labels in 2026 will go a long way in informing drinkers of the alcohol content of their drinks and of the risks involved (p. 27). Drinkaware welcomes recent news that HIQA is planning to undertake an evidence review and modelling analysis during 2025 with a report to be published in 2026. This will serve to inform an update of the national guidelines, similar to steps taken in other countries (Lynch, 2024).

It is imperative that we continue to gather and analyse evidence-informed research on patterns of alcohol consumption and the aspects of Irish adults’ lives and livelihoods. The findings reported here from our Barometer series are based on quantitative evidence and so do not provide insight into adults’ relationship with alcohol in practice. However additional questions added since 2021 also provide important indicators of both awareness and openness to the HSE

⁴ Participants were asked the following question as part of 2024 Barometer ‘Do you feel you have a clear understanding of the following terms: standard drink, binge drinking and responded Yes/No/Don’t know.

LRWGs. Understanding how people experience alcohol in their everyday lives is crucial in reducing alcohol misuse and harm, with qualitative data required to do this. With this in mind, we are looking forward to undertaking a specific body of qualitative research commencing in early 2025 that focuses on young adults aged 18-24 years.

As the national independent charity working to prevent and reduce alcohol misuse in Ireland, Drinkaware's work is grounded in research, evidence and rigorous evaluation. The findings from our Barometer series will help to inform the design of appropriate behaviour change interventions and messaging to prevent and reduce alcohol misuse and harm in Ireland in accordance with Drinkaware's stated mission. A national multi-media campaign on the HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines took place by Drinkaware in 2024 (''Know the Low'') with specific reference to binge drinking and at-home drinking. More needs to be done on an on-going, wider and collaborative basis tailored to benefit those at highest risk and will be incorporated into Drinkaware's work programmes in 2025 and throughout its new strategic cycle 2025-2028.

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