

Factsheet – Alcohol: the Irish situation

January 2016

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. [Health Service Executive](#)

How do we know how many people drink alcohol in Ireland?

The Healthy Ireland Survey conducted face-to-face interviews with individuals aged 15 and over. Fieldwork was conducted between November 2014 and August 2015.²

How many people drink alcohol in the Republic of Ireland?

The results showed that²:

- 76% of the Irish population drink alcohol
- 53% of drinkers do so at least weekly
- Men are more likely to drink than women
- Those aged 25-64 are more likely to drink than those younger or older.

Risky Single Occasion Drinking (binge drinking)^a

- Almost 4 in 10 (39%) drinkers binge drink on a typical drinking occasion with over a fifth (24%) doing so at least once a week
- Despite lower levels of drinking in more deprived areas and lower social classes, there was

^a RSOD more commonly known as binge drinking is defined as consuming 60g or more of pure alcohol on a single drinking occasion the European Commission's project [Standardizing Measurement of Alcohol-Related Troubles](#) (SMART).

higher levels of binge drinking

- 15% of those drinking at harmful levels felt in the past 12 months that their drinking harmed their health, and 22% felt they should cut down on their drinking.

Alcohol consumption by social class

Analysis of drinking behaviour using the [National Deprivation Index](#) also showed that those living in the most deprived areas were less likely to consume alcohol than those in the least deprived. A similar pattern existed in terms of social class with 81% of those in the higher groups having drunk alcohol in the past 12 months, compared with 73% in the lower groups.²

How much alcohol do Irish people consume?

In 2013 the Health Research Board carried out the National Alcohol Diary Survey.³ The main objective of this survey was to estimate personal consumption of, and expenditure on, alcohol among the general population aged 18–75 years living in private households in Ireland. The survey included a comprehensive series of questions on both the rates and patterns of alcohol consumption in Ireland and on alcohol-related harm. The survey interviewed 5,991 respondents in 3,897 households.

The results showed that:

- 75% of all alcohol was consumed as part of a binge drinking session.
- One in five (21.1%) drinkers engaged in binge drinking at least once a week.
- Almost two thirds (64.3%) of 18-24 year-olds drinkers who participated in the survey consumed six or more standard drinks on a typical drinking session in the last year, for example three or more pints of beer, six or more pub measures of spirits or more than 600mls of wine (a regular bottle is 750mls).
- One in eight (13%) men and almost one in ten (9%) women drank their recommended weekly guidelines in one sitting in the week prior to the survey. Among 18-24 year-olds, 28% of men and 22% of women consume weekly guidelines in one sitting.
- When figures are applied to the population of drinkers: -
 - More than €50.6 million was spent on alcohol in the week prior to the study;
 - 3,230 work-or-study years were lost through alcohol related illness in the year prior to the study.
- In the week prior to the survey 43% of standard drinks are consumed at home, 42% in a pub/nightclub and 10% in restaurant or hotel.
- 64% of men and 51% of women started drinking before the legal age of 18.
- Monthly binge drinking is most common among 18-24 year old age group (at 60%).
- Harmful drinking is highest among 18-24 year old age group (at 75%).
- Dependent drinking is highest among 18-24 year old age group (at 15%).
- 21% of 18-75 year olds did not consume alcohol in previous 12 months.

Harmful drinking

The National Alcohol Diary Survey^{3, 4} used the WHO's [AUDIT-C](#) screening tool to identify those with harmful drinking patterns. In this survey more than half, 54.3% of 18–75-year-old drinkers were classified as harmful drinkers. Harmful drinking was more common among men (69.5%) than women (38.9%) and more common among 18–24-year-olds (74.7%) than 65–75-year-olds (33.8%).

Harms to others

Five measures were used to assess the negative consequences experienced by people as a result of someone else's drinking 'harm to others' (these questions were asked of all participants, including drinkers and non-drinkers):

1. Had property vandalised by someone who had been drinking;
2. Been a passenger with a driver who had too much to drink;
3. Been hit or assaulted by someone who had been drinking;
4. Had financial trouble because of someone else's drinking; and
5. Had family problems or relationship difficulties as a result of someone else's drinking.

17.1% of respondents experienced at least one of the five harms as a result of someone else's alcohol use with little difference between men's (18%) and women's experience (15.6%).

Harms to self

Eight questions on 'harms to self' were asked of those who had consumed alcohol in the previous 12 months:

1. Felt that your drinking harmed your home life or marriage;
2. Felt that your drinking harmed your friendships or social life;
3. Felt that your drinking harmed your health;
4. Felt that your drinking harmed your work or studies: for example, missing school/work, not doing your work/studies well or losing your job/dropping out of school;
5. Felt that your drinking harmed your finances;
6. Been in an accident when you had been drinking;
7. Got into a physical fight when you had been drinking; and
8. Stopped by the police because of drunk driving or drunken behaviour.

The overall prevalence of drinkers experiencing at least one of the eight harms as a result of their own alcohol use was 29.9%, with men 1.5 times more likely than women to report harms (men 35.7%, women 24.1%). The experience of at least one alcohol-related harm as a result of their own drinking was highest among 18–24 year-olds (at 56%) and decreased with increasing age.

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 most recent published data from the NDTRS ^{6,7} shows that:

The number of cases entering drug treatment who reported alcohol as their main problem drug decreased from 8,604 in 2005 to 7,549 (-12%) in 2013.

Of the 7,549 cases who reported alcohol as their main problem drug:

- 222 (3%) were aged under 18 years; 2,494 (33%) were aged 18–34; 2,010 (27%) were aged 35–44; and 2,454 (32%) were aged 45–64.
- 3,578 (47%) were new cases.
- 1,649 (22%) lived in Dublin.
- 4,811 (64 %) were men.
- 1,438 (19 %) used alcohol with other drugs.

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, and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent.

Alcohol was involved in 35% of poisoning deaths in 2013, more than any other substance. 57% of deaths where alcohol was implicated involved other drugs (polydrug poisonings), mainly benzodiazepines (44, 56%). Alcohol alone was responsible for 15% of all deaths. ⁸

The [National Registry of Deliberate Self-Harm](#) is a national system of population monitoring for the occurrence of deliberate self-harm, established at the request of the Department of Health and Children by the National Suicide Research Foundation. In 2014, alcohol was involved in just over one third of all cases (35%) and more involved in male episodes of self-harm than female episodes (37% versus 33%, respectively).⁹

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.

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.

^b 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.

- 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. Department of Health. (2015) [Healthy Ireland survey 2015 - summary of findings](#). Department of Health, Dublin
3. Long, Jean and Mongan, Deirdre (2014) [Alcohol consumption in Ireland 2013: analysis of a national alcohol diary survey](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.
4. [Alcohol data](#) National Documentation Centre interactive tables.
5. [Treatment data](#) National Documentation Centre interactive tables.
6. Health Research Board. (2015) [Treated problem alcohol use in Ireland: figures for 2013 from the National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.
7. Health Research Board (2015) [Drug-related deaths and deaths among drug users in Ireland: 2013 figures from the National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.
8. Griffin, Eve and Arensman, Ella and Corcoran, Paul and Dillon, Christina B and Williamson, Eileen and Perry, Ivan J (2015) [National Registry of Deliberate Self Harm annual report 2014](#). [National Suicide Research Foundation](#), Cork.

Further reading:

Gell, Lucy and Ally, Abdallah and Buykx, Penny and Hope, Ann (2015) [Alcohol's harm to others](#). Institute of Alcohol Studies.

[Hope, Ann](#) (2015) [Research evidence to prevent alcohol-related harm: what communities can do in Ireland](#). Galway Healthy Cities: Galway City Alcohol Strategy to Prevent and Reduce Alcohol-Related Harm (2013-2017). Galway.

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

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