

Factsheet – Alcohol: the Irish situation

November 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.

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

^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.

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 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:

- 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.

How much alcohol do Irish 15–16-year-old students consume?

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has conducted surveys of school-going children every four years since 1995, using a standardised method and a common questionnaire (see www.espad.org) including questions on alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use. The sixth survey was conducted in 36 European countries during 2014/15.³ 1,400 Irish students took part in this latest survey.

Of these

- 74% of students have tried alcohol, with more girls (75%) than boys (72%) having done so.
- Beer was by far the most popular drink, with 29% of students having had it in the last 30 days.
- 28% of students had engaged in binge-drinking in the past month.
- More girls than boys drink for mood lifting reasons, and drinking to fit in was the least popular reason reported among boys and girls.
- Boys (7.8%, n=35) were more likely to engage in drunk driving than girls (1.1%, n=5).
- Far more students with F grades were current drinkers (60%) than those with A grades (21%).
- 11% of students who had no friends who used alcohol were current drinkers, compared with 69% of students who said that all their friends drink.

Table 1: Alcohol use in the last 30 days since 2003 among 15-16-year-olds in Ireland³

Alcohol use in the past 30 days	2003 (%)	2007 (%)	2011 (%)	2015 (%)
Boys	71	57	48	35
Girls	74	56	52	37
All	73	56	50	36

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%.⁴

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%.⁴

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.⁴

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 2014, one-in-three self-harm presentations were alcohol-related. Alcohol was more involved in male episodes of self-harm than female episodes (37% versus 33%, respectively).⁵

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.

The most recent published data from the NDTRS^{6, 7} shows that the number of cases entering treatment who reported alcohol as their main problem drug decreased from 8,604 in 2009 to 7,541

^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 2014 (-12%).

Of the 7,451 cases in 2014 who reported alcohol as their main problem drug:

- 163 (2%) were aged under 18 years; 2,467 (33%) were aged 18–34; 2,035 (27%) were aged 35–44; and 2,542 (33%) were aged 45–64 and 237 were aged over 65 (3.2%).
- 3,674 (48%) were new cases.
- 1,688 (22%) lived in Dublin.
- 4,757 (63%) were men.
- 1,395 (18%) used alcohol with other drugs.

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 46.9% between 2006 and 2015, i.e. from 2,767 to 1,188.⁸

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 137 (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.⁹

When mortality data from the NDRDI for the years 2008–2013 were analysed there were 6,479 alcohol-related deaths between 2008 and 2013, which accounts for 3.8% of all deaths in Ireland in that period. Of these, 69% of alcohol-related deaths were due to medical causes (such as liver disease), 16% were due to poisonings and 15% traumatic causes (such as a road traffic collision). This indicates that one death per day is due to poisoning or trauma and two deaths are due to chronic conditions. Three people died each day in 2013 as a result of drinking alcohol.⁴

What impact has alcohol on the Irish economy?

According to the report *Overview of alcohol consumption, alcohol-related harm and alcohol policy in Ireland*.⁴

- 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.

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. 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.
4. Mongan, Deirdre and Long, Jean (2016) [Overview of alcohol consumption, alcohol-related harm and alcohol policy in Ireland](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
5. Griffin, Eve and Arensman, Ella and Corcoran, Paul and Dillon, Christina B and Williamson, Eileen and Perry, Ivan J (2015) [National Self-Harm Registry Ireland annual report 2014](#). Cork: National Suicide Research Foundation.
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. [Treatment data](#) HRB National Drugs Library interactive tables.
8. [Mental Health statistics](#) HRB National Psychiatric In-patient Reporting System database.
9. 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.

Further resources:

[Alcohol data](#) HRB National Drugs Library interactive tables.

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

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.

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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www.drugsandalcohol.ie/24954

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