

## Factsheet – Alcohol: the Irish situation

July 2016

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### 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.<sup>1</sup>

### 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 much alcohol do Irish people consume?

In 2013 the Health Research Board carried out the National Alcohol Diary Survey.<sup>2, 3</sup> 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<sup>a</sup> 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-old 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 more than the recommended amount in the low-risk weekly drinking guidelines in a single day in the week prior to the survey.
- In the week prior to the survey 43% of standard drinks were 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 (according to [DSM-IV](#) criteria) 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<sup>2, 3</sup> used the World Health Organisations [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 higher among 18-24-year-olds (74.7%) and lowest among 65-75-year olds (33.8%).

### **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 were analysed, that were either wholly attributable (alcohol is a necessary cause for these conditions to manifest) or partially attributable (alcohol must be a component cause). 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%.<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>a</sup> Risky Single Occasion Drinking 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).

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%.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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).<sup>5</sup>

### **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<sup>b</sup>. 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<sup>6, 7</sup> shows that the number of cases entering treatment who reported alcohol as their main problem drug decreased from 8,604 in 2005 to 7,549 (-12%) in 2013.

Of these:

- 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.

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 2013, i.e. from 2,767 to 1,470.<sup>4</sup>

### **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.

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<sup>b</sup> 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.

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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

### **What impact has alcohol on the Irish economy?**

- 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.<sup>4</sup>

### **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. Long, Jean and Mongan, Deirdre (2014) [Alcohol consumption in Ireland 2013: analysis of a national alcohol diary survey](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.
3. [Alcohol data](#) HRB National Drugs Library interactive tables.
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. [Treatment data](#) HRB National Drugs Library interactive tables.
7. Health Research Board. (2015) [Treated problem alcohol use in Ireland: figures for 2013 from the National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#). Health Research Board, Dublin.
8. 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 reading:

- 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/>

### How to cite this factsheet:

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## **HRB National Drugs Library – Find the evidence**

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## **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](mailto:drugslibrary@hrb.ie)

**w** [www.drugsandalcohol.ie](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie)