



**DRINKAWARE**

Barometer 2023  
Research Paper Series

*A detailed overview of the Drinkaware  
Barometer 2023 Findings*

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Drinkaware, April 2024

## Introductory note from Ipsos B&A

Ipsos B&A is delighted to partner with Drinkaware on the National Barometer Survey, which has provided such compelling insight on Irish lifestyle behaviours over the course of the research series. The research has benefited enormously from Drinkaware's commitment to the series throughout the Covid period, and also to the considered investment of their team in the research design and analysis. The value of this commitment is evident in this year's findings where the dynamic of consumption patterns can be assessed in the context of Covid, whether this be the rise in alcohol consumption overall, or specifically in the frequency of binge drinking. The research effectively highlights the scale of the challenge while also clearly illustrating green shoots of optimism, and potential solutions.

*John O'Mahony, Director, Ipsos B&A*

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## Barometer 2023 Research Paper, April 2024

### *A detailed overview of the Drinkaware Barometer 2023 Findings (Barometer Research Paper Series)*

**Keywords, terms:** alcohol, home consumption of alcohol, alcohol misuse and harm, binge drinking, drinking practices and habits, positive behaviour change

#### Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine adults' drinking behaviours in Ireland and their attitudes and motivations regarding alcohol in 2023. Collectively, extensive data gathered since the commencement of the Drinkaware Barometer series in 2017 allows for an annual examination of drinking practices over time and how they relate to other practices within daily life. A quota-controlled sampling procedure was utilised to deliver a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults (n=1012). Questionnaire design incorporated internationally recognised question models including AUDIT-C, Drinking Motive Questionnaire: Revised SF and Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale. Significant shifts were identified: 59% of Irish adults now drink alcohol on at least weekly basis (52% in 2020), 26% of drinkers now typically binge drink (20% in 2020); and there has been a rise in drinkers who binge drank in the past 30 days (46% in 2020, 56% in 2023). Motivational patterns also changed over 4 years with an overall decline in adults drinking to cope (55% in 2023, 51% in 2022, 61% in 2021, 60% in 2020). While mental wellbeing scores improved modestly in 2022, low mental wellbeing again increased to just over one third of adults in 2023. However, low mental wellbeing consistently peaked among 25–34-year-olds (45% in 2023), and those that increased their alcohol consumption since COVID-19. However, more adults than ever before now show positive intentions. This includes an increase in adults wanting to drink alcohol less often (24% in 2020 to 36% in 2023) and those already making small positive changes (31% in 2020 to 41% in 2023). 30% of adults now also agree that 'Irish drinking culture has changed for the better since COVID-19.' The wealth of data generated since 2020 provides crucial insights into both the impact and legacy of COVID-19 on behaviour change. However, the unique context of 2023 means that we are still facing significant issues such as increased cost-of-living and insecurities surrounding social unrest and international conflicts taking place. Disparity between consumption increases and desire to drink less indicates a need for public education & engagement to enable and sustain positive changes post COVID-19 pandemic.

**Target group / focus:** Irish adults (Individuals aged over 18)

## Research Matters:

It is said that good research holds the power to illuminate the pathways toward positive societal change by uncovering the roots and patterns of behaviour, informing effective preventions and interventions, and inspiring collective action towards a healthier, more balanced world.

Welcome to the latest instalment of the Drinkaware Barometer series - our signature body of research conducted on an annual basis for the past 8 years.

Research sits at the epicentre of all we do at Drinkaware and the Barometer gives us the key findings and evidence from which we inform, educate and deliver practical tools that support the public in understanding the harms caused by alcohol misuse.

## The Barometer Matters:

Per capita alcohol use in Ireland in 2023 was 9.9 litres of pure alcohol per person aged 15 years and over, a 2.9% decrease from 2022 (based on 2022 population estimates) (HRB 2024). Overall per capita consumption is crucial to assess long-term trends and provide comparative levels of alcohol consumption in a country. However, to quote the Health Research Board (2021) "surveys of alcohol consumption are also essential in order to estimate the level of harmful drinking patterns in a country, as well as demographic variations in consumption. This information is important in order to estimate the extent of alcohol-related harm in a country and identify groups of people who may be at higher risk of alcohol-related harm due to their patterns of consumption".

In The Drinkaware Barometer, you will not find statistics on per capita litre consumption levels of alcohol in Ireland - there is a plethora of valuable data available from organisations who directly record such metrics. What the Barometer does, is bring to life the social picture behind such annual stats - it has become the "go-to" resource for tapping into the lived experiences of adults in Ireland, providing insights into the who, why, where, what, when and

how of the Irish public's behaviour and attitudes in relation to alcohol. It also identifies unhealthy patterns of consumption as well as positives such as intent to drink less, which cannot be identified by consumption figures alone.

The Barometer identifies sub-populations at risk from harmful drinking patterns, and this understanding of their behaviour, attitudes, and motivations are key to Drinkaware's mission to prevent and reduce the misuse of alcohol.

A core strength of our Barometer lies in the fact that it is a consistent year on year snapshot of data, on a like for like basis. This rich and growing repository of research provides a snapshot of the socio-cultural behaviour and landscape of Ireland in relation to alcohol which ultimately serves Drinkaware in fulfilment of its vision and mission.

## Alcohol Research Is Complicated

As heretofore, it is not surprising to see both positive and negative trends emerging from this year's Drinkaware Barometer.

For the fourth year in a row, over half of adults who drink alcohol are drinking on at least a weekly basis. However, in 2023 this number peaked to the highest level ever since the inception of the Barometer, rising to 6 out of 10 drinking on at least a weekly basis. Binge drinking patterns continue apace with over one in four drinkers now typically binge drinking whenever they drink alcohol. This has risen from 1 in 5 just 3 years ago.

Meanwhile, we continue to live with the impact of Covid-19, as practices which began during the Pandemic have now become normalised. Whilst at home drinking has been a feature of Irish life for many years, it took on a whole new meaning during the Pandemic.

As with all data around alcohol, the Barometer findings are nuanced and complex and cannot be viewed in isolation. The need for joined up thinking

has never been more evident in terms of developing a cohesive national response to Ireland's relationship to alcohol especially when one considers the continued levels of low mental wellbeing reported for over 4 years in a row and its correlation with harmful drinking patterns. The data points to an Ireland that has not returned to the more positive wellbeing levels of pre-Pandemic times.

Paradoxically, more drinkers than ever before say they want to drink less (36%) with over 41% making small positive changes to their alcohol consumption in the previous 30 days. These positive intentions rise to 54% amongst young adults (18-24 years). Such encouraging trends need to be harnessed and supported with tools and information that Drinkaware is committed to providing, while also looking more in-depth at these cohorts in 2024 and beyond.

However, intentions are only one side of the coin, and we must further understand the gap that exists between intention versus the capacity to make healthier choices.

The Barometer hasn't just identified the desire to change and drink less but has also captured tangible tools and techniques that the public believe would assist them in making these changes. Drinkaware will continue to use the Barometer to understand, and ultimately prevent alcohol misuse, via evidence-informed resources and campaigns that truly help those who need them.

## Where To From Here

It is one thing to identify problematic drinking patterns, vulnerable cohorts of the population and positive trends and intentions. However, it is also incumbent upon us as the national, independent charity with the remit of reducing alcohol misuse, to provide the public with the information and support tools that will turn these positive intentions into concrete actions that will create real and lasting change.

## Prevention is better than cure, as the saying goes

The public demand for high-quality, trustworthy and accessible information around alcohol has never been

higher, yet the report also identifies key gaps in the public's level of information and awareness around what a standard drink is, what binge drinking looks like, and an almost non-existent awareness around the HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines for alcohol. And again paradoxically, the research finds that when shown the Guidelines, half of all adults believed them to be reasonable, and would follow them.

However, if the public are simply not aware of these Low-Risk Guidelines, how can we expect to instigate a positive change in behaviour around same? Crucially it is also important to embed awareness around the tangible life-changing benefits that reducing alcohol consumption can bring.

This is surely not an insurmountable task, as evidenced by the growing appetite for information and change in our data. We would urge a collaborative, holistic and inclusive approach from Government and indeed from all those involved and doing great work in this arena, in order to build and sustain positive change.

The Barometer findings provide a roadmap to Drinkaware in 2024 and beyond, enabling us to pursue our goal of reducing the harm caused by alcohol misuse, in an ever-evolving landscape and social context.

In a society that has seen the stress of the Covid-19 Pandemic stresses replaced by economic pressures such as increased cost of living, harmful alcohol consumption patterns can shift to different cohorts. By no means can we ever say our work is done or the problem is solved.

As indicated in the report, there are specific cohorts for whom targeted interventions are needed. By way of example, this body of research also served to inform our latest campaign "Here's to Change" where we aim to define a new and better drinking culture that makes the public more informed and normalises a health-conscious or sober curious lifestyle.

## There is so much more to be done.

As the new CEO of Drinkaware, I have thoroughly enjoyed working on this body of work which I have found hugely helpful in providing focus and prioritising our efforts. I am also looking forward

to developing this research further. We hope that this data also proves insightful in serving to inform all stakeholders working in the arena of health, behaviour change and harm reduction.

I wish to thank and acknowledge Drinkaware's Head of Research, Dr Ann Stokes in curating and bringing to fruition this invaluable body of research. I would also like to pay tribute to our partners at Ipsos B&A, and in particular John O'Mahony, for their consistent leadership and rigorous approach to informing the public by way of professional independent research on this crucial societal harm.

*Dearbhla O'Brien, CEO Drinkaware*

# Introduction

Rapidly emerging research and evidence into the current impacts and longer-term consequences of the global COVID-19 pandemic that took place between 2020-2022 continues to gather pace. In June 2023, we commissioned Ipsos B&A to undertake its latest in a series of Drinkaware Barometers examining Irish adults' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol.

While the onset of COVID-19 posed a major challenge to the Barometer in 2020, the wealth of data generated since then, including in 2023 may provide insight into the legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the unique context of 2023 means that we are facing a series of ongoing crises such as the high cost-of-living and social unrest at both national and international levels. The past few years have been extremely difficult with no formal closure to the COVID-19 pandemic, the post COVID-19 pandemic world didn't materialise as many hoped and we are still grappling with changes in our behaviour such as how and where we work and the differences in relation to our social circles. COVID-19 may therefore still form a key part of telling the 2023 story and how we are feeling right now.

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 experienced 2023 e.g., stress/tension, mental health, household dynamics, as well as the behaviour of other adults.

The Barometer has been conducted by Ipsos B&A on behalf of Drinkaware on seven different occasions over the last seven years, namely January 2017, June 2017, January 2018, April 2019, April 2020, May 2021, and June 2022. We also conducted a Drinkaware Index in conjunction with Ipsos B&A during 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

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.

On each occasion, the Drinkaware team takes time to carefully consider revisions as well as potential for additional questions to fully capture attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol in any given year. Since our 2022 Barometer, the combination of the pandemic and ongoing war in Ukraine has sent prices soaring, changing the way we live our lives. In 2022, some of the additions provided excellent insights to general assumptions that the Irish drinking culture is changing, with signs of a positive cultural shift in attitudes to alcohol identified. For instance, 39% of adults agreed that 'Irish drinking culture has changed for the better over the last 3 years'.

Now in our eighth iteration of the Barometer, it was essential that we took care to repeat the core questions that need repeating. However, we were also conscious of in so doing, building or creating more avenues for exploration that run the risk of us not having the capacity to do justice to all the findings in this ever-expanding data set. To that point, it was vital that we reviewed each draft question in terms of its direct application to how it shapes our work and campaigns. Focus should not just be on comparing year on year in the Barometer series, we need to leverage investment i.e., we asked X in 2022, therefore we decided to ask Y in 2023 to find out more on this. For example, small positive changes were highlighted year on year in 2022 with 30% of drinkers agreeing they 'would like to drink alcohol less often' (up from 24% pre-COVID-19). This peaks amongst weekly and binge drinkers, and those who have increased consumption since the start of COVID-19. There was scope to tease this out further in 2023 with additional questions. Thus, the next step is to better understand the adults who are drinking/want to drink less and provide information on why these *actions* are taken and not just intentions. We added several options this year to help us in this regard: *'I'm more conscious now about the health harms associated with alcohol'*, *'I've had a bad experience when I drink that I don't want*



to repeat', 'I can't afford to drink as much as I used to', 'I'd rather spend my money on other things.' At the same time, we were also interested in potential barriers to positive behaviour change and this year we decided to find out more information from those that stated that they don't want to drink less. We provided participants with a number of potential reasons to help explain why, including the following: 'I don't need to because I drink less than most people I know', 'I'm not an alcoholic / dependent drinker', 'My friends wouldn't want to go out with me' and 'I don't need to now because I will drink less when I'm older.'

We felt that there was merit in starting to ask additional questions in 2023 rather than simply repeating the same questions from previous years. This allowed us to build up a more comprehensive understanding of specific issues across the Barometer series. For example, this was the case when considering how to incorporate COVID-19 in our 2023 Barometer. While COVID-19 is no longer a public health emergency, it is vital that we continue to examine the legacy of the pandemic and specifically its impact on adults' drinking. We therefore decided to ask a series of questions in 2023 that would help us add to data previously collected during 2020-2022 ('COVID-19 has impacted the amount/frequency of alcohol I drink') as well as continuing to examine positive cultural shifts reported ('Irish drinking culture has changed for the better since COVID-19').

Mental wellbeing reported in 2022 had not returned to pre-pandemic levels of high wellbeing identified in 2018 while we also identified some worrying findings for specific cohorts during 2020-2022. This included young adults and those that increased the amount or frequency of alcohol they consumed since March 2020. Alongside the internationally validated tool, the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009), we decided for 2023 to ask several questions capturing both the potential 'legacy' of COVID-19 data in terms of impact on wellbeing but also information regarding adults' anxieties relating to the current context of the rising cost of living, while remaining cognisant of the sensitivity required for these questions. For instance, participants were asked whether they agreed/ disagreed with the following statements 'My daily routine has changed since COVID-19' and 'My social circle is smaller since COVID-19'.

On drinking occasions, we made several slight changes to the options presented in our previous Barometers conducted during the COVID-19 Pandemic from 2020-2022. For example, we were interested in examining solitary drinking in different contexts post-Pandemic and therefore added the option of 'Going out for a drink alone' as well as 'Drinking at home alone'. We were also concerned that potentially the various options did not fully capture all possible occasions for drinking, particularly for young adults. For instance, the outdoor/open area option added in 2021 because of public health measures introduced was removed in 2022 to reflect changes with lifting of such COVID-19 restrictions. However, we were concerned that there was potential room for misinterpretation in not capturing adults that drink in open spaces post-COVID-19 including at events, and so in 2023, we decided to add back in this option, while also revising further to the following: 'Drinking with others outdoors/ in gardens/ parks/ festivals or concerts.'

Following the planning phase and decisions regarding specific questioning, in June 2023, 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 post COVID-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis during 2023. 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 e.g., 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 2023.

Due to the large volume of data, we intend to publish future papers in 2024 focusing further on several topics and issues. The full library of Barometer data since COVID-19 will be available to those wishing to view further details and we welcome secondary analysis of this data following permission and completion of a declaration. Please contact [research@drinkaware.ie](mailto:research@drinkaware.ie) for more information.

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 = 1,012). Online surveys were conducted in July-August 2023. 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)

## Sample

All data collected was securely stored and analysed by Ipsos B&A using quantitative software. Where Ipsos B&A obtains personal identifiable data, it is stored in a safe and secure manner with limited access, in compliance with their ISO 27001 and all relevant Data Protection legislation<sup>1</sup>. Key descriptive statistics on the full sample are presented in the table below. Information gathered was also broken down further by life stage (single, pre-family, family pre-school, family pre-teen, family teen, empty nester) allowing for further examination of different household types in 2023 and will be included as relevant in this paper, such as when there is a statistically significant difference.

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<sup>1</sup>Any personal identifiable data linked to market research surveys is stored by Ipsos B&A for no more than 12 months after which it is securely destroyed – unless explicit informed consent is given by individuals to store it for longer. IPSOS B&A's Acumen online surveys are hosted by Microsoft Azure in Dublin. Security is integrated into every aspect of the Azure platform with multiples levels of encryption and back up. Vulnerability assessment tests are run on Acumen Online and Ipsos B&A servers in Dublin on a quarterly basis. The results of the online surveys are downloaded to Ipsos B&A's secure server for processing

Table 1 Full Sample Breakdown Barometer 2023 (Base: All adults aged 18+ n = 1012)

		n	%
Gender	Male	495	49%
	Female	517	51%
Age	18-24	122	11%
	25-34	197	16%
	35-44	186	20%
	45-54	152	18%
	55-64	148	15%
	65+	207	19%
	Social class	ABC1	564
C2DE		448	48%
Region	Dublin	276	29%
	Rest of Leinster	268	27%
	Munster	292	27%
	Connaught/ Ulster	176	18%
Area	Urban	742	66%
	Rural	270	34%
Household type	Single	322	32%
	Pre-family	91	9%
	Family pre-school	141	14%
	Family pre-teen	125	12%
	Family teen	68	7%
	Empty nester	265	26%
	Family any	334	33%

## Findings by theme

The focus and purpose of this specific paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of 2023 Barometer findings while also referring to previous Barometer findings as relevant in helping to demonstrate how Irish adults are currently drinking and if/how their behaviours have changed. Key findings will be presented in this paper across eight key themes namely:

1. Patterns of alcohol consumption
2. Prevalence of Binge and hazardous drinking
3. Motivations for drinking
4. Occasions for drinking
5. Mental wellbeing
6. Behavioural change - positive steps and challenges
7. Support for moderating drinking
8. National attitudes to drinking practices

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# 1.

## Patterns of alcohol consumption

### Current drinkers:

- 82% of adults report consuming alcohol in the past 30 days (in line with 2022 - 83%).
- The lower percentage of current drinkers reported in both 2020 (72%) and 2021 (77%) may therefore reflect the social distancing measures associated with periods of lockdown during these two time points and the closure of licensed premises on public health grounds.
- Quantity of alcohol consumed - When we asked those who had drunk alcohol in the last 30 days how many standard drinks they consumed on a typical day in 2023, the mean (average) reported was 3.90.

### Non-drinkers:

- 18% of adults report not drinking (this encompasses 9% not in the past 30 days, 9% never drink alcohol). This rises to over 1/5 of adults aged 65+ years with 23% of adults in this age cohort not drinking.

### Weekly drinking:

- 59% of adults state that they drank alcohol on at least a weekly basis in the past 30 days, this is the highest national incidence since the inception of the Barometer with a 7-point increase on last year - 2022 (52%), 2021 (55%), 2020 (52%).
- Higher numbers of men report drinking on at least a weekly basis (63%), compared with 55% of women.
- Across all adult age cohorts, the 50+ years age cohorts report the highest levels of weekly+ drinking (62% 50–64-year-olds and 61% of 65+ year olds).
- Across households/life stages, statistically significant peak among empty nesters with 2/3 (66%) reporting drinking on weekly+ basis in past 30 days.
- 10-point difference in urban and rural weekly+ drinking with 62% of adults in urban areas and 52% of adults in rural areas drinking on at least weekly basis.
- Weekly+ drinking is also higher among adults from higher social economic status groups ABC1F 61%, compared with those from lower social economic status groups C2DE 55%.

Table 2: Weekly+ drinking 2023 -2020

	Total	Gender		Age					Peak
	N=1012 (2023)	Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65+	Empty Nester
Weekly+ 2023	59%	63%	55%	59%	54%	56%	62%	61%	66%
2022	52%	59%	45%	33%	50%	51%	54%	63%	
2021	55%	59%	50%	51%	49%	54%	52%	66%	
2020	52%	57%	48%	38%	51%	56%	51%	57%	

## Change in drinking levels:

- 10% of drinkers indicate that they have increased the amount or frequency of alcohol consumed in the past 12 months<sup>2</sup>; the self-declared increase is equally apparent amongst men and women (at 9% and 10% respectively).
- Weekly+ drinkers are more likely to report having increased the amount or frequency of alcohol consumed in the past 12 months, with 13% doing so.
- 61% of drinkers state that either the amount or frequency of alcohol consumed in the past 12 months has stayed the same/no change.

Table 3 Personal drinking review of past 12 months, 2023 (Base n= 928, ever drank alcohol)

	Personal drinking	Total
Amount	Decreased	31%
	Stayed Same	61%
	Increased	7%
Frequency	Decreased	32%
	Stayed same	61%
	Increased	7%
Both	Decreased	37%
	Increased	10%

- In terms of changes in the past 30 days, 12% of drinkers indicate that they have consumed more standard drinks in the past 30 days; 19% indicate that they or someone in their household has increased their consumption of standard drinks in the past 30 days.
- Young adults aged 18-24 years are statistically significantly more likely to state that they have drunk less in the past 30 days than any other age group with almost 1/3 doing so (32%) (vs 17% total).

Table 4 Drinking more, less, about the same in past 30 days, 2023 (n=928), 2022 and 2021

	2023	2022	2021
Any more personal	12%	12%	8%
Any more others in household	12%	9%	11%
Any less personal	17%	14%	19%
Any less others in household	22%	25%	25%
About the same personal	71%	75%	73%
About the same others in household	66%	68%	64%

<sup>2</sup> Note the specific question was changed in 2023 – previously between 2020-2022 the range referred to since COVID-19/March 2020, therefore unable to compare directly year-on-year.

## 2.

## Prevalence of binge and hazardous drinking

### Binge

Binge Drinking – According to the World Health Organisation, Heavy episodic drinking is defined as the proportion of adult drinkers (aged 15 and older) who have had at least 60 grams or more of pure alcohol on at least one occasion in the past 30 days. An intake of 60 grams of pure alcohol is approximately equal to 6 standard alcoholic drinks. Consuming six or more standard drinks of alcohol in one sitting is classified as binge drinking or excessive drinking.

### Typical Binge drinking

- Participants were asked 'How many standard drinks did you drink on a typical day when you drank in the past 30 days?'
- One quarter (26%) of drinkers engage in binge drinking when they drink (i.e. drink 6 or more standard drinks) on a typical day when drinking in 2023, with no real change reported on last year (27% in 2022); Lower % rates for typical binge drinking were reported during the COVID-19 pandemic with 22% of drinkers in 2021 and 20% in 2020, citing drinking 6 or more standard drinks in past 30 days.
- Binge drinking as a typical pattern again continues to peak among men, with almost 1 in 3 male drinkers (32%) reporting doing so (35% in 2022, 31% in 2021, 27% in 2020).
- Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, 36% of drinkers reported that they had binge drank in 2018 \*Note wording updated, therefore comparison is not direct - 19% of adults in Ireland reported drinking more than 6 standard drinks in the past year on a weekly basis (incorporating 1% daily and 18% weekly) and 17% reported doing so monthly in the past year (Drinkaware 2019).

### Frequency of Any Binge drinking

- Participants were also asked 'How often did you have 6 or more standard drinks in a single occasion in past 30 days?'
- 56% of adults who drink have engaged in binge drinking in the past 30 days, peaking among male drinkers (64%) and 18–24-year-olds who drink (72%), as well as a continued overall increase among adult drinkers on previous years (55% in 2022, 49% in 2021, 46% in 2020).
- In terms of binge drinking at least once a week in the past 30 days, 16% of drinkers report doing so in 2023, peaking at 23% of male drinkers.

Table 5 Levels of Binge Drinking 2023 (Base drink alcohol in past 30 days n=838)

	Total	Gender		Age				
	%	Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65+
Binge on typical day in past 30 days	26%	32%	19%	21%	28%	29%	26%	21%
Any binge drinking in past 30 days	56%	64%	47%	72%	63%	55%	56%	41%
Binge @ least once a week in past 30 days	16%	23%	9%	19%	11%	14%	19%	17%

Table 6 Levels of Binge Drinking over four Time-Points 2023-2020

	2023	2022	2021	2020
Binge on typical day in past 30 days	26%	27%	22%	20%
Any binge drinking in past 30 days	56%	55%	49%	46%
Binge @ least once a week in past 30 days	16%	17%	14%	15%

## AUDIT-C

Hazardous drinking may also occur where consumption exceeds the HSE recommended Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines (17 standard drinks for men or 11 standard drinks for women across the week with at least 2 alcohol-free days) but harm may not yet have been experienced. In other words, drinking in a hazardous manner means that although they have not yet experienced harm, the person is likely to in the future. It is also possible to drink hazarously by binge drinking (six or more standard drinks in one sitting), even if the guidelines are adhered to.

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 2023 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. Table 7 below outlines the AUDIT-C scores in our study based on those that consumed alcohol in 2023. 53% of Irish adults that consumed alcohol in the last 30 days scored less than 5 on AUDIT-C (lower risk drinking). However, 47% had scores of 5+ AUDIT-C positive, a classification that indicates a propensity to increasing, or hazardous, drinking. The 2023 incidence of AUDIT C 5+ score peaks among males (56%) and adults in family pre-teen life stage (57%).

Table 7 AUDIT-C scores based on those that consumed alcohol in last 30 days, 2023 (n=838)

AUDIT-C Score	2023	2022	2021	2020
5-	53%	53%	56%	58%
5+	47%	47%	44%	42%



### 3.

## Motivations for drinking

The Drinking Motive Questionnaire: Revised Short Form (DMQ-R SF) consists of 12 motivations for drinking and a five-point response scale<sup>3</sup>. The individual's responses are used to determine the extent to which they drink for social reasons, enhancement reasons, conformity, or coping reasons. A revised version of this measure was included in the survey to enable responses to be analysed according to the different motivations.

To reflect the unique 'Lockdown' circumstances, the presented motivations were previously updated for the purposes of the Barometer in both 2020 and again in 2021 (with additional added) to ascertain the key drivers and reasons for adults' drinking in the context of COVID-19 (for example, additional coping options - '*to help manage social distancing/isolation*', '*to help with sleep*', '*to help with boredom/isn't much to do*'). The motivations were revised slightly in 2022 and again in 2023 to reflect the post-pandemic context. Below are the options that participants were provided with in 2023:

1. Social reasons: because it makes social gatherings more fun, to celebrate, and/or because it improves social gatherings.
2. Enhancement reasons: because you like the feeling, to get a buzz, because it's fun, to get drunk, and/or to mark the end of the working day/week.
3. Coping reasons: because it helps you when you feel depressed or anxious, to cheer up when you're in a bad mood or stressed, because you feel lonely, to help with sleep, to help with boredom/isn't much to do, to help relax/unwind, and/or because it's there.
4. Conformity reasons: to fit in with a group you like, to be liked, and/or so you won't feel left out.

Over half of adults who drink in 2023 report drinking for social, enhancement and/or coping reasons always/most of the time/half of the time in the past 30 days (i.e. high frequency). Social and enhancement reasons are the joint most common motivation for drinking reported in 2023 with 56% of adults reporting doing so (54% in 2022). This is closely followed by drinking for coping reasons at 55% (51% in 2022). While each of the motivational categories shows an increase this year, this is particularly the case for Conformity with over 1 in 5 adults (22%) reporting drinking for conformity reasons always/most of the time/half of the time - this a 6-point rise on 2022 (16%). Each of the motivational categories is also far more prominent for young adults, as evident in table 8 below.

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<sup>3</sup> The DMQ-R DF (Kuntsche & Kuntsche 2009) encompasses the following motives: 1. Social - because it makes social gatherings more fun, because it improves parties and celebrations, because it helps you enjoy a party 2. Enhancement – because you like the feeling, because it's fun, to get high 3. Conformity – so you won't feel left out, to be liked, to fit in with a group you like 4. Coping - because it helps you when you feel depressed or nervous, to cheer up when you are in a bad mood, to forget about your problems.

Table 8: Drinking motivations past 30 days, 2023 and 2022 (always/most of the time/half of the time) (n 2023=838)

Motivation	Total (2023)	Total (2022)	Year on year difference	Age (2023)				
				18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65+
Social	56%	54%	+2	80%	72%	56%	47%	38%
Enhancement	56%	54%	+2	72%	69%	56%	51%	37%
Coping	55%	51%	+4	66%	64%	56%	51%	40%
Conformity	22%	16%	+6	48%	35%	20%	10%	11%

When the four categories are broken down further, the top reason for drinking in 2023 is to help relax and unwind with 44% of adults that drank alcohol in the past 30 days reporting doing so always/most of the time/half of the time (i.e. high frequency). This is closely followed by drinking to celebrate with 43% of adults that currently drink doing so. The third top motivation was because it's fun, cited by 38% of adults that drank alcohol. There has been a rise in the incidence of drinking motivations reported across practically all criteria in each of the four categories this year; while the biggest rises relate to coping motivations – in particular, bad mood/stress (19% +6 rise), feeling anxious (16% +5 rise), boredom (16% +5 rise) and sleep (14% +5 rise).

However, significantly larger portions of some cohorts such as younger adults and household types including families with younger children and pre-school families report higher incidences of reasons for drinking across almost all of the categories when broken down further in 2023 as outlined in Table 9 below, including some potentially concerning peaks. For instance, over a quarter of 18–24-year-olds and families with younger children that currently drink report drinking in the past 30 days (high frequency) as it helps when they feel depressed or anxious (27% of 18–24-year-olds and 26% of families with pre-school children). Worryingly, while 17% of drinkers report drinking to get drunk in the past 30 days (high frequency), 47% of 18–24-year-old drinkers and 29% of families with pre-school children drinkers report doing so.

Table 9: Drinking motivations broken down across four categories, past 30 days, 2023 (always/most of the time/half of the time) (n=838)

Motivation	2023	2022	Year on year difference	Statistically significant peaks 2023
Because you feel lonely	12%	8%	+4	23% 18-24 yr olds
To help with sleep	14%	9%	+5	23% 18-24 yr olds, 22% family pre-school, 23% family pre-teen
Because it helps when you feel depressed or anxious	16%	11%	+5	27% 18-24 yr olds, 23% 25-34 yr olds, 26% family pre-school
To cheer you up when you are in a bad mood or stressed	19%	13%	+6	31% 18-24 yr olds
Because you like the feeling	35%	35%	=	45% 25-34 yr olds
To get a buzz	25%	23%	+2	39% 18-24 yr olds, 38% 25-34 yr olds, 35% family pre-school
Because it makes social gatherings more fun	34%	34%	=	51% 18-24 yr olds, 47% 25-34 yr olds, 47% pre-family
To fit in with a group you like	14%	11%	+3	28% 18-24 yr olds, 27% 25-34 yr olds
Because it improves social gatherings	29%	30%	-1	45% 18-24 yr olds, 45% 25-34 yr olds
To help with boredom/ isn't much to do	16%	11%	+5	25% 25-34 yr olds
To help relax and unwind	44%	42%	+2	56% family pre-school
Because it's fun	38%	35%	+3	54% 25-34 yr olds, 56% pre-family
To be liked	10%	7%	+3	26% 18-24 yr olds
So you won't feel left out	14%	10%	+4	34% 18-24yr olds, 23% 25-34 yr olds
To get drunk	17%	14%	+3	47% 18-24 yr olds, 28% 25-34 yr olds, 29% family pre-school
To mark end of working day or week	25%	22%	+3	36% 18-24 yr olds, 35% 25-34 yr olds, 34% pre-teen
Because it's there (at home)	16%	14%	+2	24% 25-34 yr olds, 27% family pre-school

## 4.

### Occasions for drinking

In terms of occasions where alcohol was consumed in the past 30 days, the pattern of recent occasions is largely stable year-on-year<sup>4</sup>.

Drinkers were most likely to report drinking 'a small number of drinks at home with the family/housemates over mealtime/dinner' in the past 30 days with 33% doing so at least once a week in 2023 (30% in 2022). The second highest occasion reported is drinking at home alone – almost 1 in 3 adult drinkers report drinking alcohol at home alone at least once a week in the past 30 days. While this is similar to the 2022 figure (31%), it represents a drop in those drinking at home alone as reported in 2021 and 2020 (38% and 39% respectively) during the COVID-19 pandemic and public health restrictions that were in place at that time. Men are most likely to report drinking at home alone, with 38% of male drinkers doing so in 2023.

Several statistically significant peaks in occasions are identified with a prominence particularly among weekly drinkers, young adults, and men (as above). For instance, 44% of weekly drinkers report drinking 'a small number of drinks at home with the family/housemates over mealtime/dinner'

A high incidence across multiple occasions among weekly drinkers is also identified in 2023 as evident in Table 10 below with weekly drinkers peaking in 7 of the 11 occasions.

Two additional occasions were added for 2023 - going out for a meal<sup>5</sup> (14% at least once a week) and going out for a drink alone<sup>6</sup> (8% at least once a week).

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<sup>4</sup>As much as possible, data collection for the Barometer tends to be carried out at a similar time each year (during spring/summer) so as not to skew the data.

<sup>5</sup>The rationale was to examine drinking accompanied by food in other contexts and not just in the home

<sup>6</sup>The rationale was to examine solitary drinking in other contexts and not just in the home

Table 10: Occasions where alcohol consumed in past 30 days, 2023 (n=838)

Drinking occasion	At least once a week	Statistically significant peaks
A small number of drinks at home with family/ housemates at mealtimes/dinner	33%	44% weekly drinkers
Drinking at home alone	32%	43% weekly drinkers, 38% men
A small number of drinks at home with partner/ housemate during day or evening	29%	39% weekly drinkers
When children in bed/house is quiet	22%	29% weekly drinkers, 51% 18-24 yr olds, 30% 35-49 yr olds, 36% family pre-school, 33% family pre-teen
Several drinks at home with partner/ housemate during day or evening	21%	28% weekly drinkers
Going out for drinks with friends, with no drinking at home	18%	24% weekly drinkers, 34% 18-24 yr olds, 23% men
Going out for a meal	14%	18% weekly drinkers
Drinking in family/friend's house	11%	25% 18-24 yr olds
Mix of home drinking by yourself/with others – and then night out with friends	11%	27% 18-24 yr olds, 18% 25-34 yr olds
Drinking with others outdoors	8%	23% 18-24 yr olds,
Going for a drink alone	8%	17% 18-24 yr olds, 14% men

Location of purchase – When provided with a range of locations, adults are most likely to report purchasing alcohol in a supermarket with almost a quarter (24%) doing so at least once week. Less than 10% of adults report purchasing alcohol at least once a week in each of the other locations e.g., 9% in convenience stores, 6% in off-licenses, 4% in fuel forecourts and 3% online (including delivery). However, young adults are more likely to report purchasing alcohol in these locations, with statistically significantly higher occurrence across all age groups - 17% in convenience stores, 13% in off-licenses, 13% in fuel forecourts and 10% online (including delivery). Supermarkets dominate as the location of purchasing alcohol especially amongst weekly drinkers – 37% of weekly drinkers purchase alcohol in the supermarket 'at least once a week'.

*Table 11 Location of purchase, 2023 (n=1012)*

Location	At least once a week	Weekly+ drinkers
Supermarket	24%	37%
Convenience stores	9%	14%
Fuel forecourt	6%	10%
Off-licence	4%	5%
Online (including delivery)	3%	5%

# 5.

## Mental wellbeing

The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) (Stewart-Brown et al. 2009) tool with 7 items was used to allow for analysis of any difference in response patterns according to mental wellbeing. Each of the 7 items carried a score between 1 and 7, giving individual participants an overall score between 7 and 35, with a lower score denoting a lower level of mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing scores provide an extraordinary representative picture of broad culture at a certain point in time.

The structure of the mental wellbeing scale continues to be vastly different to the benchmark level pre- COVID-19 pandemic in 2018 when 11% of adults reported low mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing plummeted when COVID-19 hit in 2020, with over 1 in 3 (37%) adults reporting low mental wellbeing at that time. The mental wellbeing scale then stabilised since the dramatic shift that occurred at the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020, albeit at very poor levels' with over one third of Irish adults (35%) indicating low mental wellbeing in 2021. While there was a drop in 2022 with 30% of adults reporting low mental wellbeing, prevalence of low mental wellbeing has again increased in 2023 to 34% of adults.

The incidence of the low group is significantly higher among adults aged under 50 years in 2023 with over 4 in 10 adults in these age cohorts reporting low mental health. For instance, high figures of low mental health scores peak among the following age cohorts – 44% of 18–24-year-olds, 45% of 25–34-year-olds and 41% of 35–49-year-olds.

Those rating their mental wellbeing as 'high' dropped from 63% in 2018 to just 20% during the initial lockdown phase in 2020. Since then, just over 1 in 4 adults report high mental wellbeing (26% in both 2021 and 2022), with 27% doing so in 2023.

39% of adults that report any binge drinking in the past 30 days report low mental wellbeing in 2023 (23% report a high mental wellbeing alongside any binge drinking). 44% of adults that report increased consumption in the past 12 months also had a low mental wellbeing score, while 18% reported a high mental wellbeing alongside increased consumption.

Table 12: Mental wellbeing scale 2023 (n=1012)

MWS	Total %	Gender		Age							Increased past 12 months
		Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65+	Never	Any	
High	27%	27%	27%	14%	18%	24%	29%	47%	32%	23%	18%
Medium	38%	37%	39%	42%	37%	35%	42%	37%	37%	38%	37%
Low	34%	35%	34%	44%	45%	41%	29%	16%	30%	39%	44%

Additional questions asked in the 2023 Barometer provide more indicators on adults' wellbeing in Ireland in 2023.

### For example:

- 21% of adults with low mental wellbeing state that they are more likely to drink alcohol during the daytime in past 12 months (vs 14% overall drinkers)
- 20% of adults with low mental wellbeing state that they are buying more alcohol than they did a year ago (vs 15% overall drinkers)
- 30% of adults with low mental wellbeing state they are more likely to drink alcohol during the week in the past 12 months (vs 23% overall drinkers)
- 7% of adults state my daily routine has changed since COVID-19 (rising to 55% of 25–34-year-olds)

Of adults that reported reduced consumption in past 30 days in 2023, 31% cited mental health as strongly influencing them to drink less in 2023. While those with low mental wellbeing reported statistically significant higher levels of increased stress/tension (43%).

Thankfully, the measure of stress and tension in the household has shown a significant improvement since 2020; however, almost one quarter of Irish adults (24%) continue to indicate an increase in stress/tension in the past 30 days when asked in 2023 (47% in 2020, 27% in 2021, 26% in 2022).

Table 13: Increase in household stress/tension 2023 (living with family/friends n=844)

Stress/tension	Total	Under 50 yrs	+50 yrs	Statistically significant peaks
Increased	24%	29%	17.5%	35% family pre-school, 39% increased frequently past 12 months, 43% low mental wellbeing

Across gender, age, and household type, over 1 in 3 families with pre-school children reported significantly higher levels of increased stress/tension (35%). Those who reported increased frequency in consumption in the past 12 months also reported a statistically significant increase (39%), as did adults with low mental wellbeing (43%).



## 6.

### Behavioural change - positive steps and challenges

The 2023 Barometer also uncovers several positive indicators which have been growing steadily year-on-year in relation to cultural attitudes and expectancies regarding alcohol in Ireland, (while challenges also remain) including:

- Over 1 in 3 (36%) of adults now agree they would like to drink alcohol less often, the highest such incidence in the Barometer to date.
- 41% say they have made small positive changes to their drinking habits in the past 30 days, again the highest such incidence in the Barometer to date.
- Over one quarter (27%) of adults would like someone that they live with to drink less.
- These sentiments all peak amongst those aged under 25 years and binge drinkers. For instance, 54% of 18–24-year-olds say they would like to drink less often, 57% have made small positive changes and 45% would like someone they live with to drink less. Similarly, binge drinkers are more likely to agree with the three statements with 46% wanting to drink less often as well as having made small positive changes and 34% wanting someone they live with drink less. In addition, those that report increased consumption in the past 12 months are also more likely to want to drink less often (59%).
- Families with younger children are also more likely to agree that they would like someone they live with to drink less (40% pre-school and 41% pre-teen families).

Table 14 Attitudes to current alcohol consumption 2023 (n=1012)

	Total				Statistically significant peak 2023
	2023	2022	2021	2020	
I would like to drink alcohol less often	36%	30%	30%	24%	54% 18-24 yr olds, 46% binge drinkers, 59% increased consumption
I have made small positive changes to my drinking	41%	35%	37%	31%	57% 18-24 yr olds, 46% binge drinkers 57% decreased consumption
I would like someone I live with to drink less	27%	23%	37%	31%	45% 18-24 yr olds, 34% binge drinkers 40% pre-school 41% pre-teen

## Influences in drinking less:

- In 2023, we added a new question focused on understanding in further detail the key influences for those who have reported reducing their consumption in the past 30 days and/or past 12 months (n=578). Participants were asked to pick from a list of both general and detailed options (see Table 15 below) which had strongly influenced them to drink less. In both iterations of this measure, sentiments relating to health and personal finances are the most prominent.
- Overall, nearly 2/3 of adults (63%) who had reduced consumption cite physical health or fitness as a reason for drinking less with 31% citing mental health as an influence for reduced drinking. Physical health/fitness as an influence, peaks among those aged 65+ with 74% agreement among those who had reduced consumption, while mental health as an influence, peaks among 25–34-year-olds who had reduced consumption at 46%. Health is the second highest detailed influence cited with almost half (48%) of those drinking less agreeing that they were more conscious now about the health harms associated with alcohol and this peaks among those 65+ years that had reduced their consumption (60%).
- Finances are a significant influence to drink less with 45% citing personal finances as a general reason for doing so. In terms of detailed responses, 52% of drinkers that had reduced consumption saying they would rather spend their money on other things or 32% saying they can't afford to drink as much as they used to.
- In further detail, almost 1 in 4 (24%) cite the behaviour of others as a consequence of excessive drinking as an influence for drinking less. 14% had a bad experience when drunk that they don't want to repeat, while this peaks among 18–24-year-olds who had reduced consumption with 24% citing it as an influence for drinking less.

Table 15: Influences to drink less 2023 (n=578)

In general		In detail	
Physical health/ fitness	63%	I'd rather spend my money on other things	52%
Personal finances	45%	I'm more conscious now about the health harms associated with alcohol	48%
Mental health	31%	I can't afford to drink as much as I used to	32%
Impact on family/ relationships	19%	Behaviour of others as a consequence of excessive drinking	24%
My job/career	12%	I've had a bad experience when drunk that I don't want to repeat	14%
Other	8%	Other	6%

## Influences in not drinking less:

- We also added an additional question in 2023 to gain an understanding of what influenced adults that did not reduce their consumption/not want to drink less and *disagreed* with the statement 'I would like to drink alcohol less often' (n= 245). This represents 26% of the 928 adults that report drinking in 2023.
- In general, these adults did not see their drinking as an issue that needed to change/and not of relevance to them i.e. drink less, with the most common being 'I'm only a social drinker' (41%), followed by 'I don't need to because I drink less than most people I know' (36%).

Table 16 Influences not to drink less 2023 (n=245)

I don't need to because I drink less than most people I know	36%
I've never experienced any harm from the amount I drink	23%
I can handle it, I've a good tolerance	17%
I'm only a social drinker	41%
I'm not an alcoholic / dependent drinker	32%
I'd be the odd one out in my group	3%
My friends wouldn't want to go out with me	1%
I don't need to now because I will drink less when I'm older	7%
Other	9%

## HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines:

- HSE low-risk weekly guidelines<sup>7</sup> are now considered 'reasonable' by half of all adults. 50% of adults in 2023 believe that the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines for men are reasonable, while 49% of adults believe that the guidelines for women are reasonable.
- The incidence of Irish adults who would follow the guidelines if they were aware of them has increased to 50% in 2023 – the highest ever reported figure (47% in 2022, 42% in 2021).
- There is a clear interest and appetite growing towards healthier drinking behaviour in 2023 as 48% of those who have drunk in past 30 days (vs 46% in 2022, 40% in 2021) and 39% of those who binge drank (vs 34% in 2022, 28% in 2021) say they would follow the guidelines if they were aware of them. Yet only half (51%) of those who said they would like to drink less often said they would follow them if aware (46% in both 2022 and 2021).
- In contrast, 28% of adults state that they would *not* follow the guidelines if they were aware of them (lower than previously recorded – 30% in 2022 and 36% in 2021). Unwillingness to follow the guidelines if aware peaks among some cohorts - for instance, 35% of men, rising to 38% any binge drinker and 34% of those with a low mental wellbeing score.

<sup>7</sup> Drinking within the HSE Low Risk Weekly Alcohol Guidelines reduces your risk of alcohol-related health issues. 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
- Common examples of a standard drink are, half a pint of beer, 100ml glass of wine and 35.5ml of spirits.

Table 17 Would you follow the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines if aware, 2023 (n=1012)

	Total	Gender		Frequency		Any Binge	Would like to drink less often	Alcohol consumption increase 12 months
		Male	Female	Drank last 30 days	Weekly+			
Yes	50%	46%	54%	48%	45%	39%	51%	45%

- However, there remains no national awareness of the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines. Only 3% of adults correctly identify the HSE low risk weekly guidelines for men or women (with no improvement/change on previous years).
- Interestingly, just over half of men and women expect the maximum standard drinks to be lower than the actual guidelines state. For instance, 55% of adults expect that the guidelines for men are lower than 17, while 51% expect the guidelines for women are lower than 11.
- Following on from 2022, we again asked questions relating to attitudes surrounding the guidelines in 2023 and found an increase surrounding such. For example, just over two thirds of adults agree with the statement the guidelines should vary by age (67%) and gender (66%), representing a 4–5-point year-on-year increase for each (62% for both respectively in 2022). Albeit half of adults (51%) agreed that the guidelines should be adapted to a daily format in 2023 (with little change in 2022 at 52%).

### Self-belief of alcohol terms:

- In terms of self-belief, 84% of adults believe that they have a clear understanding of the term ‘standard drinks’ (no change on 2022) and 85% believe they have a clear understanding of binge drinking in 2023 (drop on 91% reported in 2022).
- To reflect growing use/popularity of terms such as mindful drinking and sober curious<sup>8</sup>, we also asked adults for their self-belief of such in 2023. 40% believe that they have a clear understanding of the term ‘mindful drinking’, while 13% believe they have a clear understanding of ‘sober curious’. Self-belief in ‘mindful drinking’ peaks among females (45%) and 18–24-year-olds (59%), while ‘sober curious’ peaks in both age cohorts under 34 years (30% 18–24-year-olds and 20% 25–34-year-olds).

<sup>8</sup> Mindful drinking is an attitude and mindset. Drinking mindfully is actively asking yourself questions about why you drink, without judgement. Before drinking at an event, you can pause and ask yourself, ‘do I actually want this drink’ or ‘will drinking this lead to negative outcomes. When you drink mindfully, you become more aware of how alcohol affects your mind and body. For many, this creates a healthier relationship with alcohol that is grounded in the present. This can help you to drink less and keep within the HSE low-risk weekly guidelines.

Being sober curious means a bit more questioning of when, how much and why we drink. And a lot less of simply ‘going along’ with the dominant drinking culture that exists across social situations, often subconsciously or because we feel that it is socially expected of us. Adopting a sober curious mindset often pairs naturally with mindful drinking. It is a proactive approach to monitoring and adapting your relationship with alcohol.

Further information is available from <https://www.drinkaware.ie/advice/sober-curious-and-mindful-drinking/>

## Awareness of health effects from excessive alcohol:

- 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 (See table 18 below). The negative effects listed were in line with those on the Drinkaware website. In line with 2022, liver disease remains the health effect most prominently associated with excessive drinking in 2023 with 86% adults citing their awareness (84% in 2022). Adults aged 65+ years are most likely to cite awareness of liver disease with 92% doing so. Five other effects are recognised by at least two thirds of adults in 2023, namely impaired judgement (72%), depression (68%), dehydration (68%), lack of concentration (67%) and headache (66%). Significantly higher levels of adults aged 65+ years cite awareness of impaired judgement (84%) and lack of concentration (77%) as well as 72% of females doing so.
- In 2023, participants were also asked to 'spontaneously' list any short/long-term health effects of alcohol that they can think of (See table 18 below). 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 (56%). This is followed by a quarter of adults (25%) who referred to brain fog/memory loss/mental health. Only 14% of adults refer to heart disease and stroke and 13% refer to cancer (peaking to 21% those aged 65+ years), while 9% adults cite depression. Adults spontaneously cited a range of other negative effects that were not on the list of negative effects provided – for instance, skin conditions (2%), obesity (9%), high blood pressure (4%), hangover (4%), kidney disease (6%), affect relationships (4%), addiction (7%) and death (1%).
- No adults spontaneously refer to foetal disorders during pregnancy, while over half of adults (58%) cite their awareness of it from the list of negative health effects provided, peaking among 70% of women.

Table 18 Awareness of health effects of excessive alcohol 2023 (n=1012)

Health Effect	Spontaneous awareness	Total awareness (listed)
Liver disease	56%	86%
Impaired judgement	1%	72%
Depression	9%	68%
Lack of concentration	1%	67%
Headache	3%	66%
Disturbed sleep	2%	64%
Injuries and accidents	4%	62%
Heart disease and stroke	14%	59%
Foetal disorders during pregnancy	0%	58%
Nausea	3%	57%
Anxiety	3%	55%
Stomach disorders	1%	51%
Reduced sports performance	0%	51%
Cancer	13%	48%
Pancreas	0%	41%
Immune system	0%	34%

## Parents' specific attitudes

- In total, families made up 33% of the total sample in 2023. However, families are not a homogenous group and parental engagement in aspects of daily life is generally higher among families with young children compared to those with older children and teenagers<sup>9</sup>. Parents of children under 18 years (n=322) were asked a number of specific questions regarding their attitudes to drinking at home in 2023, with each response showing an increase on what was reported in 2022 (see table 19 below).
- Across all families with children in the sample, 41% of parents indicate that they are comfortable with children being present when they are drinking (compared with 38% in 2022), decreasing to 39% for families with teens in 2023.
- Just over a quarter of all parents (27%) are more comfortable with children seeing them drink at home than at social settings outside the house (compared with 18% in 2022). This decreases to 20% of families with teens and increases to 30% of families with pre-teens/primary school children who agree with this statement in 2023.
- 48% of parents agree that they have specific rules on drinking around their children (compared with 44% in 2022). There is a statistically significant peak among pre-school families with 50% in agreement but decreases to 42% among families with teens in 2023.

Table 19 Parent' specific attitudes to alcohol, 2023 (n=322)

	Parents any agree	Pre-school	Pre-teen	Teen
I am comfortable drinking at home with/when my children are present	41%	41%	41%	39%
I am more comfortable with my children seeing me drink at home rather than at a social setting outside the house	27%	28%	30%	20%
I have specific rules on drinking around my children	48%	50%	48%	42%

<sup>9</sup> We previously examined 'household type' regarding alcohol consumption in the context of the initial COVID-19 lockdown during 2020 to further knowledge and understanding regarding families and alcohol. The full paper is available to access here: <https://drinkaware.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Families-Alcohol-COVID-19.-Barometer-2020-Research-Paper-Series.pdf>

## 7.

## 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 20 below).

- In line with the previous two 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 29% of adults in 2023 (32% in 2022, 31% in 2021). This is followed by a device to monitor blood alcohol levels (24%) and an app to monitor drinking (23%). 22% of adults considered a drinks calculator, a public health information campaign and/or no-low alcoholic drinks as most helpful. This was closely followed by 21% of adults citing a measuring cup with indications of what a standard drink is.
- Among those who would like to drink alcohol less often, the weekly guidelines, monitoring app, measuring blood alcohol levels, low or no alcoholic drinks and drink free time periods (such as 'Dry January') are considered the tools and techniques which would be most helpful, with over one quarter of this cohort agreeing with these options as helpful in 2023. In addition, statistically significant peaks are reported in 2023 among those who would like to drink alcohol less often and the following options: an app to monitor drinking (29%), a pen/paper drink diary (9%), drink-free time periods (26%) and professional assistance e.g. dietician, GP, therapy, specialist etc (19%).

Table 20 Tools and techniques for moderating drinking, 2023 (Base ever drink alcohol n=928)

Tool/technique	Overall % 2023	Overall % 2022	Overall % 2021	Would like to drink less often 2023
Clear information on what is meant by a standard drink and the maximum number an adult should drink in a week (LRWGs)	29%	32%	31%	29%
A device to monitor blood alcohol levels	24%	24%	23%	28%
An app to monitor drinking	23%	23%	24%	29%
A drinks calculator	22%	23%	26%	25%
A public health info campaign	22%	21%	22%	26%
No or low alcoholic drinks	22%	25%	n/a	28%
A measuring cup that indicates what is meant by a standard drink	21%	21%	24%	24%
Signage of HSE LRWGs at retail outlets at point of purchase	18%	19%	21%	19%
Drink free periods (such as Dry January)	16%	17%	n/a	26%
Information booklet containing advice tips on cutting down	14%	11%	12%	18%
Digitally accessible/online resources and info	13%	15%	13%	16%
Professional assistance e.g. dietician, GP, therapy, specialist etc.	12%	10%	n/a	19%
A pen/paper drinks diary	6%	5%	5%	9%
Other	2%	1%	2%	1%
Nothing, just my own efforts	27%	29%	30%	16%

## 8.

## National attitudes to drinking practices

Participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about their attitudes to specific drinking practices (See Tables 20 and 21 below). For example, 30% of adults now agree that 'Irish drinking culture has changed for the better since COVID-19', rising to over one third of 65+ year olds (37%). Almost one third of adults that drink (32%) agree that COVID-19 has impacted the amount and/or frequency of alcohol that they drink, peaking among binge drinkers (40%) and those who report decreased consumption in the past 12 months (43%). In addition, 47% of adults agree that their daily routine has changed since COVID-19, while over half (52%) state that their social circle is smaller since COVID-19.

In terms of place of consumption, 38% of adult drinkers agree that they are more likely to drink at home in the past 12 months and rising to 45% among weekly drinkers and 44% of binge drinkers. On timing, only 14% of adults that drink state that they are more likely to drink alcohol during the daytime in the past 12 months. However, this peaks among several cohorts including young adults and families with younger age children – with 24% of those aged 18-24 and 25% of 25–34-year-olds that drink as well as 23% of families with pre-school children. Similarly, those that report binge drinking in past months (20%) as well as adults with low mental wellbeing (21%) are more likely to report drinking during the day. Overall, 23% of adults that drink state they are more likely to drink during the week in the past 12 months. Likelihood of drinking during the week is statistically higher among young adult drinkers (35% 18–24-year-olds and 33% 25–34-year-olds), any binge drinkers (34%), families with primary school children (35%), as well as adults with low mental wellbeing (30%).

In terms of the behaviour and influence of others, 2 in 3 adults that drink agree that they don't like socialising with people when they're drunk. 59% indicate that extending opening hours beyond midnight would cause people to drink more alcohol - a sentiment that peaks among young adults under 25 years (at 69%). While only 16% of adult drinkers agree that not drinking would have a negative impact on their friendships/relationships, this peaks among drinkers from young adults and families with younger age children with both cohorts more likely to say that not drinking would have a negative impact (28% of 18–24-year-olds, 25% 25–34-year-olds, 25% families with pre-school children).

In terms of buying alcohol, 15% of adults that drink believe they are buying more alcohol in 2023 than they did a year ago, peaking among the young adult cohorts with 30% of 18–24-year-olds and 21% of 25–34-year-olds doing so, as well as families with younger age children (23% families with pre-school children and 24% families with pre-teens). However, 41% of adult drinkers believe that they are buying less alcohol in 2023 than they did a year ago.

80% of adults that drink believe that they enjoy alcohol responsibly when asked, peaking among those aged 65+ years with 86% in agreement, as well as adults that report any binge drinking (74%).

On attitudes to drink driving, overall, 86% of adults believe that any amount of alcohol impairs your ability to drive (vs 87% in 2022), while young adults report lower levels of agreement (77%).



Table 21 Attitudes to drinking practices, 2023 (n=1012)

National attitudes	2023 any agree
Any amount of alcohol impairs your ability to drive	86%
I don't like socialising with people when they're drunk	66%
Extending pub and club opening hours beyond midnight will cause people to drink more alcohol	59%
My social circle is smaller since COVID-19	52%
My daily routine has changed since COVID-19	47%
Irish drinking culture has changed for the better since COVID-19	30%

Table 22 Attitudes to drinking practices, 2023 (base ever drank alcohol n=928)

I am more likely to drink alcohol during the daytime in the past 12 months	14%
I am more likely to drink alcohol during the week in the past 12 months	23%
I am more likely to drink alcohol during the weekend in the past 12 months	37%
I am more likely to drink at home in the past 12 months	38%
COVID-19 has impacted the amount/frequency I drink	32%
Not drinking would have a negative impact on my friendships/relationships	16%
I am buying more alcohol than I did a year ago	15%
I am buying less alcohol than I did a year ago	41%
I enjoy alcohol responsibly	86%

### Age of first alcoholic drink:

- Participants were again asked in 2023 to recall the age of their first drink. Irish adults cited that they had their first alcoholic drink on average at 16 years (mean 15.8 years for both 2023 and 2022 vs mean 15.5 years in 2018). For those aged under 35 in 2023, it is 15.4 years (14.8 in 2022 and 2018). The vast majority of adults report having had their first alcoholic drink in the company of friends (65%) rather than parents (23%). However, 18–24-year-olds are more likely to state being with their parents when having their first alcoholic drink compared with other adult age cohorts, with 43% reporting doing so. A substantial 1 in 3 adults (32%) think they were too young when they had their first alcoholic drink.

Data gathered in the Barometer 2023 study and presented in this paper provides a comprehensive insight into adults' current drinking behaviours in Ireland and their attitudes and motivations regarding alcohol. Collectively, the Barometer series allows for annual examination of drinking practices over time and how they relate to other practices within daily life. The 2023 patterns of consumption presented in this paper also demonstrate a range of significant issues with several key developments that warrant discussion and will now be outlined further under two core themes: 1. unhealthy patterns and 2. positive behaviour changes.

## 1. Unhealthy patterns

### Weekly drinking

Over half of adults report drinking on at least weekly basis since 2020. Healthy Ireland 2023 findings are encouraging in identifying a 38% weekly drinking rate, however, we found weekly drinking is at its highest level since the inception of the Barometer series at 59%. It is important to highlight different questions and periods of time in the two surveys and it is therefore unadvisable to directly compare results. For instance, Healthy Ireland 2023 (DoH 2023) asks of those who had alcohol in past 12 months, the percentage that reported drinking at least once a week. The Barometer series refers to current drinking and asks about consuming alcohol on at least weekly basis in past 30 days. It is important to note that in the 2022 Healthy Ireland survey the period was shortened to 6 months and 55% who had consumed alcohol in past 6 months reported they normally drink once a week (this figure was slightly higher than the weekly+ drinking reported in our 2022 Barometer with 52% of adults doing so).

### Rise in frequency of binge drinking, concerning drinking occasions and motivations plus centrality of home

Over the course of several years, our data shows home as a prominent drinking occasion and space, particularly in 2023 with potentially worrying

practices taking place while drinking at home. For instance, the normalisation of drinking at home alone with increasing numbers of adults doing so is set alongside other indicators such as those drinking during the week or during the day with increases occurring since the COVID-19 pandemic. While at-home drinking among adults was always present (Drinkaware 2020), it took on a whole different meaning during the COVID-19 pandemic – *where* it became normal to drink ultimately changed, and *who* we drink with became more solitary - a pattern we see maintained in 2023. While occasions in general stay stable for 2023, there has been a rise in the incidence of drinking motivations across practically all criteria; the biggest rises relate to stress, anxiety, boredom and sleep; and more generally in relation to the Conformity category. A series of potentially worrying motivations with concerning peaks among certain cohorts warrant further attention, while the occasions where alcohol is consumed again demonstrate the centrality of at home. Recent international research conducted in Australia found that the heaviest drinkers were 3.4 times as likely to report drinking at home than those who did not drink at home (Cook et al. 2024). Other research from New Zealand found the normalisation of alcohol and drinking practices within everyday home life and seen as routinised for a sample of mid-life adults within and beyond COVID-19 lockdowns (Lyons et al. 2023).

Binge drinkers in the 2023 Barometer are consistently more likely to agree with the alcohol related sentiments in the attitudes to alcohol statements. Similarly, those who have increased consumption in the past 12 months are more likely to reference the impact of Covid-19. 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 26% of drinkers identified in Barometer 2023 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 2023 identified a quarter (24%) 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 2023). An additional concern arises when there is a serious

lack of understanding of the HSE Low-risk guidelines – as evident in our 2023 Barometer with only 3% of adults demonstrating accurate knowledge. This is despite high levels of self-belief in understanding of alcohol terms reported (for instance, 84% adults believe that they have a clear understanding of the term standard drink, while 85% believe that have a clear understanding of the term binge drinking). 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).

Another related issue in 2023 findings is the potentially worrying rise in drinking at home alone especially given misunderstandings of how much one is actually consuming. Indeed, there is little research conducted on drinking at home alone (Cook et al. 2023). Healthy Ireland (2022) found 11% of those aged 15+ reported drinking alone upon recalling the last day they consumed alcohol over the past 6 months (DoH 2022). In a mixed-methods study conducted prior to COVID-19, solitary home drinking was regarded as more socially acceptable for men than women and reflective of a lack of opportunity to drink with others as well as associated with more harmful regular patterns of alcohol use (Cook et al. 2023).

From 2020, over 4 out of 10 adults that have consumed alcohol score +5 on AUDIT-C and the 47% figure for 2023 represents an increase on previous years. Previous analysis using data from Healthy Ireland Survey 2016, found that more than half (52.3%) of all drinkers in Ireland were classified as hazardous drinkers using the AUDIT-C (HRB 2021). Similarly, the HRB (2021) note that the National Alcohol and Drug Survey found that 54.3% of drinkers scored 5 or more on the AUDIT-C. Crucially while a high proportion of drinkers met AUDIT-C criteria for hazardous drinking and HED was common in this analysis, the researchers found that the majority considered themselves as being a light or moderate drinker (73.5%) (HRB 2021). As previously highlighted (Drinkaware 2022a), this once again points to a serious gap in knowledge and awareness over how much adults are actually consuming as identified here and previously as part of our Barometer series. Evidence gathered through the AUDIT-C offers a crucial warning system including several concerning peaks with propensity

to increasing or hazardous drinking among over half of male drinkers (56%) and families with pre-teens (57%) identified in the 2023 Barometer.

## Mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing scores for 2023 provide indicators on the impact of COVID-19 throughout 2020-2021 and continue to do so in terms of the potential legacy of COVID-19 Pandemic and the current series of crises that adults in Ireland are facing. With 1/3 of adults (34%) reporting low mental wellbeing and just over 1/4 (27%) reporting high mental wellbeing in 2023, the structure of mental wellbeing scoring continues to be vastly different to the benchmark set pre-COVID-19 in 2018 (63% of adults reported high mental wellbeing and 11% low mental wellbeing in the Drinkaware Index (Drinkaware 2019). The measure of tension in the household has shown a significant improvement since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (47% increase in 2020 vs 24% increase in 2023). However, the clear link between the mental wellbeing scale and household stress/tension is identified again in 2023, with over 40% of those with low mental wellbeing more likely to report an increase in household stress/tension (43% in 2023, 46% in 2022). Additional questions in 2023 provide important indicators of adults' wellbeing and the interplay with alcohol. 62% of EU citizens think that recent world events (the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the climate crisis, unemployment, and rising food and energy costs) "somewhat" or "greatly" affected their mental health (Eurostat 2023). The same Eurobarometer study found that 46% of EU citizens had an emotional or psychological problem (such as feeling depressed or feeling anxious) in the last 12 months (June 2022-2023) (Eurostat 2023).

## 2. Positive behavioural changes (and challenges):

### The overall picture

Despite the aforementioned unhealthy patterns, there are some increasingly positive findings within the 2023 Barometer identified, as momentum for a healthier relationship with alcohol gathers pace among Irish adults. Yet there are differences in adults' behaviour, and peaks among certain cohorts

identified in this study with young adults standing out in particular. Data around alcohol is nuanced and complex which makes it difficult to directly ascertain from this, or other, data whether young adults are drinking less. While we see from our data that their behaviour in terms of binge drinking may peak relative to other cohorts, we also see peaks in terms of positive intentions with more young adults wanting to drink less often (Drinkaware 2023). For example, 54% of 18–24-year-olds in Barometer 2023 said they would like to drink less often and 57% have made small positive changes to their drinking habits. In terms of other national data, Healthy Ireland 2023 notes that there has been a notable change in drinking behaviour over the past 5 years among those aged 25–34, inclusive. Those in this age group are now less likely to have consumed alcohol in the past 12 months and less likely to drink at least once a week. This is particularly evident among individuals at the younger end of this age range. However, the latest data from Healthy Ireland 2023 found that young adults are more likely to report binge drinking with over 1/3 of 15–24-year-olds doing so on a typical drinking occasion in the past 12 months (36% of 15–24-year-olds vs 24% of the overall population). Almost half of men aged 15–24 binge drink on a typical drinking occasion, compared to roughly a quarter of women in this age group (48% and 24% respectively) (DoH 2023). In addition, UK research found that while young adults aged 18–24 years are more likely to be non-drinkers, the rise in non-drinking rates among this age group does not necessarily reveal the full story. For instance, young adults are more likely to binge drink compared to drinkers aged 25 years and over (Drinkaware UK 2023).

Overall, 1 in 3 adult drinkers (36%) now agree they would like to drink alcohol less often, the highest such incidence in the Barometer to date, while just over 4 in 10 say they have made small positive changes to their drinking habits in the past 30 days, again the highest such incidence in the Barometer to date. In terms of influences to drink less - the cost-of-living pressures appear to cause difficulties for many in 2023 as sentiments related to personal finances (as well as physical health) are the most prominent reasons provided by adults who had reduced their consumption. The additional question added on key influences in drinking less provided further important data with the prominence of sentiments of both

health and financial reasons. The latest Consumer Price Index (CPI) shows that prices for consumer goods and services in August 2023 increased by 6.3% on average when compared with August 2022. This was up from 5.8% in the 12 months to July 2023. Prices have been rising on an annual basis since April 2021, with annual inflation of 5.0% or more recorded in each month since October 2021 (CSO 2023). Nicholls and Conroy (2023) highlight the importance of social context – providing the example of COVID-19 lockdowns and ‘...it may be naïve to understand such periods as isolated reasons for consumption practice changes, instead they have acted as a catalyst in *accelerating* or encouraging change amongst those already questioning their relationships with alcohol’ (p.620). Notably the 2023 Barometer also provides important evidence and insight into potential barriers to positive behaviour change.

## HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines

While there remains no national awareness of the HSE Low-Risk Weekly Guidelines, Irish adults appear increasingly more receptive to them, as evident in the additional questions asked in this year’s Barometer. Interestingly, over 50% of men and women expect the maximum standard drinks to be lower than the actual guidelines state. 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 a low mental wellbeing score, and hence there is an urgent need for tailored information and support for guidelines to benefit those at highest risk. For instance, UK research found that while awareness of the revised UK low-risk guidelines was high, knowledge of the 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 of, 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).

## Awareness of health effects

participants were asked in 2023 an additional question to gauge levels of self-awareness of negative health effects of alcohol. A serious lack of awareness of health effects from spontaneous was identified (e.g. only 14% referred to cancer and no adults spontaneously referred to foetal disorders during pregnancy). However, health impact is cited as a major driver/influence in adults wanting to drink less. Among adults that did not report reducing their consumption in our 2023 study, there is prominence of 'not changing/wanting or needing to change' and it is vital that this must be considered alongside the danger of not knowing 'how much' they are drinking in the first place, as well as lack of awareness of health harms as both identified in this survey. Findings from a recent scoping review conducted in the EU and UK found low public awareness of the alcohol cancer link, particularly for specific types such as breast and colon cancer (Kokole et al. 2023). Awareness was higher among young people and health professionals, but lower among women (specifically for breast cancer) (Kokole et al. 2023). Irish research using data from Healthy Ireland (2015-2016) previously identified a low-level awareness of the association between alcohol use and the risk of developing breast cancer (Doyle et al. 2023). The latest *The State of Health in the EU Synthesis Report* identified that in Ireland, behavioural risk factors are a major driver of mortality in Ireland. In 2019, over 35% of all deaths in Ireland were attributed to such, including tobacco smoking, dietary risks, alcohol consumption, and low physical activity. Alcohol consumption was linked to approximately 5% of all deaths in the EU (European Commission 2023). The impact of COVID-19 must also be acknowledged. Official statistics in the UK found that alcohol-specific deaths have risen sharply since the onset of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, with alcoholic liver disease the leading cause of these deaths. In 2021, there were 9,641 deaths (14.8 per 100,000 people) from alcohol-specific causes registered in the UK, the highest number on record, 7.4% higher than in 2020 and 27.4% higher than in 2019. This rise is likely to be the result of increased alcohol consumption during the pandemic. With people who were already drinking at higher levels before the pandemic most likely to have increased their alcohol consumption during this period (ONS UK 2022). Other research that analysed alcohol-specific mortality across 14 European countries found that despite a drop in alcohol consumption and a decline

in alcohol sales by an average 5%, more people died due to alcohol-specific causes during the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, with some variation between countries (Kilian et al. 2023).

## Moderation techniques

2023 results demonstrate no and/or low alcohol products increasing in popularity among certain cohorts in our study, for example, the quarter of adults wanting to drink less. This is also evident in findings from a recent UK monitoring report which found that adults are increasingly consuming more alcohol-free and low alcohol drinks (Holmes et al. 2024). However, the report authors note that trends reveal the high cost of these drinks meaning health inequalities may widen if people from deprived households cannot afford them (Holmes et al. 2024). Dry January has also been identified as growing year on year, again more so among certain cohorts. For instance, alcohol-free time periods as a moderation technique peaks among 26% of those that would like to drink less often. This is in line with the increased popularity of short-term or temporary abstinence campaigns over the past decade in various countries and regions that has been documented in a growing body of research (Butters et al. 2023, Terney et al. 2022). A recent scoping review of one-month alcohol abstinence campaigns (OMACs) found that both successful and unsuccessful participants frequently reported health benefits, including sleep improvement and weight loss. Successful participants were also more likely to durably change their alcohol drinking habits. Overall, this research found that OMACs provide short- or mid-term harm reduction benefits for both successful and unsuccessful participants (Terney et al. 2022). However, Hamilton and colleagues (2016) previously cautioned that engagement in temporary abstinence may be problematic for risky drinkers who may then justify hazardous drinking throughout the rest of the year (as cited in Butters et al. 2023). Understanding of the rationale behind moderation techniques is also important as documented in previous qualitative research with parents, moderation involved personal rules e.g. drink only when eating, only on certain days, and not based on health guidance (Drinkaware 2022b).

## Positive public attitudes are never static/guaranteed

While there is no doubt growing positive attitudes cited by adults in this study in relation to a number of issues (for example over 1/3 would like to drink less and half would follow the HSE low-risk guidelines if aware), it is important to highlight that public attitudes shift over time, and not always in a positive direction, as identified in our Barometer series. For instance, on attitudes to drink driving, overall, there is a slight drop in adults believing that any amount of alcohol impairs your ability to drive (86% in 2023 vs 87% in 2022), and young adults report lower levels of agreement (77%). The Road Safety Authority (2024) recently found through research conducted with Ipsos B&A that nearly three-quarters (73%) of motorists surveyed agreed that 'most of my acquaintances/friends think driving under the influence of alcohol is unacceptable'. In comparison, 85% of drivers surveyed agreed with this statement in 2019, which is a concerning decline. In addition, this research also found that one in ten Irish motorists have driven after consuming alcohol in the last 12 months (RSA 2024). This is especially worrying given the recent rise in road collisions on Irish roads resulting in both increases in serious injuries and deaths, with recent analysis from An Garda Síochána revealing the total number of arrests for driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs for 2023 was 8,863 (RSA 2024).

## Parents' attitudes

Nearly half of parents agree that they have specific rules on drinking around their children (compared with 44% in 2022). However, the question remains – what are 'the rules', as this could be deemed as positive or negative i.e. allowing their teenager to drink? Previous qualitative research conducted in Ireland in 2022 found that while parents did not have an issue with children knowing or seeing them drink, they conveyed that some kinds of drinking were more acceptable than others. In so doing, the parents in this study created boundaries regarding a desirable and controlled narrative about their drinking e.g. only drinking at the weekend, as well as role modelling behaviours (Drinkaware 2022b). This is important when considering that the 2023 Barometer also finds that young adults 18-24 are more likely to report being with their parents when they had their first alcoholic drink. Young people with

permission to drink at home have previously been found to experience more alcohol-related harms than those who did not have permission (Quinn et al. 2023). The majority of teenagers from the North Dublin Region in a study conducted by TCD Medical school on behalf of North Dublin Regional Drugs and Alcohol Task Force were found to be obtaining alcohol from their parents, other adults, and friends in 2021 (O'Cearbhaill 2024). The lower age of first alcoholic drink among young adults identified in our Barometer is therefore concerning especially given recent Australian research that highlighted alcohol initiation prior to age 15 appears to be associated with an earlier onset of hazardous drinking than initiation after age 15 (Gardner et al. 2024).

- *Age of first drink* – a slight increase in age of first alcoholic drink is reported. Overall, when 2023 findings are compared with 2018 – 15.8 vs 15.5 mean age. However, it is concerning that this is younger for young adults – at 15.4 years for those aged under 35 in 2023. Delay is an important protective factor for hazardous drinking and developing alcohol dependency later in life (HRB 2022).

## Strengths and limitations

This study carefully examines patterns of consumption across a nationally representative sample of adults aged 18+ with further segmentation by key groupings to comprehensively examine the who, what, where, when, how and why of drinking in Ireland in 2023.

With self-reporting, we acknowledge that some participants may under-estimate how much they are drinking, in particular those that may be drinking to hazardous and/or harmful levels. We are also cognisant from previous qualitative research that adults may be unaware of how much they are actually drinking at home (Drinkaware 2020). Under-reporting may be most prevalent among households that are at most risk of purchasing the highest levels of alcohol (Anderson et al. 2022). Nicholls and Conroy (2023) highlight that there is a risk of participants being aware of stigma around practices such as heavy drinking or drinking alone, and therefore may have tried to present their drinking habits in a socially desirable way.

Our data is limited in the sense that this is not a longitudinal study. Indeed, at the time of research and writing of this paper it could be argued that the pandemic and its medium to long-term effects are still unfolding. According to the CSO (2022): 'The impact of the pandemic on our society will be felt for years to come', while the emotional legacy of the pandemic will become clearer in the months and years ahead (Taylor 2022). However, there is a strength in the Barometer series, as while not using the same sample, data has been gathered over a series of time points, capturing real life experiences both during the initial lockdown phase in 2020 as well as at the height of the pandemic in 2021 and now post-pandemic in 2023.

The findings reported here are based on quantitative evidence and so do not provide insight into adults' relationship with alcohol in practice. However additional questions added in 2023 also provide important indicators of adults' wellbeing and the interplay with alcohol. Understanding how people experience alcohol in their everyday lives is crucial in reducing alcohol misuse and harm, with qualitative data required to do this.

## Conclusion

The wealth of data generated since 2020 provides crucial insights into the impact and legacy of the COVID-19 Pandemic on behaviour change. The 2023 Barometer findings provide important evidence on the legacy of the Pandemic, as well as its impact on attitudes towards drinking practices including some potentially concerning drinking practices associated with drinking at home - more needs to be done to curb these harmful patterns. 2023 results show a continued increase in weekly and typical binge drinkers post COVID-19 Pandemic, despite the many negative short and long-term effects this can have on their health. However, the unique context of 2023 means that we are still facing significant issues with wider social and political uncertainties including the cost of living and environmental crises, as well as new patterns of working from home. As previously highlighted and in line with international research, the findings reported in this paper also provide significance beyond the instantaneous of the Pandemic and in understanding adults' drinking patterns during both ongoing and future times of stress, anxiety and social and financial uncertainty, as identified in recent international research (Nicholls & Conroy 2023, p.619). There is, however, room for optimism with the 2023 findings, with more people than ever before showing positive intentions when it comes to their own drinking. That said, with national awareness of the guidelines once again being almost non-existent (3%), there remains a job to be done in terms of educating, informing, and empowering the public when it comes to alcohol consumption. It is, however, very encouraging that the signs of a positive cultural shift in attitudes and expectations around alcohol continue to grow, particularly among young adult populations. Over half of those aged 18-24 now say they would like to drink less and have made small positive changes to their drinking habits in the last 30 days. We must continue to build on and sustain these green shoots to support and enable a societal shift regarding alcohol misuse. The disparity between consumption increases and desire to drink less indicates a need for public education & engagement to enable and sustain positive changes

post COVID-19 pandemic and in the current period of multiple crises.

The findings highlight both the challenges and opportunities for reducing harmful alcohol consumption in 2023. Ultimately adults may be inadvertently drinking more than they set out to do so, with a lack of awareness of how hazardous and/or harmful their drinking is. This is evident in the self-belief in key alcohol terminology and levels reported in the 2023 Barometer, which should be viewed with caution as self-belief does not always filter through with misunderstandings apparent and therefore many adults may be unintentionally drinking more and unaware of doing such.

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. Indicators such as those identified in this survey prove that the impact of COVID-19 still forms a key part of telling the 2023 story and how we are feeling right now, set within a continued time of heightened turbulence such as the high cost-of-living at both national and international levels, and threats from global insecurity and war that is taking place.



## Recommendations

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 help to inform the design of appropriate behaviour change interventions to help prevent and reduce alcohol misuse and harm in Ireland going forward and therefore Drinkaware's stated mission. We look forward to sharing future publications from our Barometer 2023 as we continue with our Barometer series and with the data collection for the next phase planned to commence in summer 2024.

The following **recommendations** merit consideration with regard to Drinkaware's work programmes and strategic cycle 2022-2024:

1. A national multi-media campaign on the HSE low-risk weekly alcohol guidelines with specific reference to binge drinking and at-home drinking.
2. The evidence provided in Barometer 2023 to be considered in future discussion regarding alcohol preventions and interventions. Drinkaware offers open access to all the charity's research data.
3. A targeted behaviour change programme based on best practice and further evidence to convert alcohol-related health information into actionable knowledge.
4. Effective collaboration & partnerships with mission aligned stakeholders.
5. Additional areas of research: Further research into those who have decreased/ made positive changes to their alcohol consumption and the links between those with low-mental wellbeing & risky/harmful drinking.

### Links for further information

Further details on our Barometer series are available at [www.drinkaware.ie/research](http://www.drinkaware.ie/research)

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