Consumption of alcohol

Factsheets
What is a unit of alcohol?

Units are a simple way of expressing the quantity of pure alcohol in a drink, offering a standardised comparison of the volume of alcohol (ABV) between alcoholic beverages.

In the UK, one unit is equal to eight grams of pure alcohol, which is also equivalent to ten millilitres of pure ethanol (alcohol). The number of grams that make up a unit varies between countries.

Alcohol takes roughly an hour for the average adult to process in the body (although there are many varying factors which mean all drinkers process alcohol differently).

Calculate:
How many units in an alcoholic drink?

ml x ABV

1,000
What are the guidelines?

The UK’s Chief Medical Officers’ guidelines state that you are safest not to drink regularly more than 14 units per week, to keep health risks from alcohol to a low level.

If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all, to keep risks to your baby to a minimum.

If you drink as much as 14 units in a week, it is advised to spread this evenly over three days or more. If you wish to cut down the amount you are drinking, a good way to help achieve this is to have several drink-free days each week.

Source: Department of Health | UK Chief Medical Officers’ Alcohol Guidelines Review – Summary of the proposed guidelines
Consumption per adult (aged 15 years and over) first hit double digits in 1997, peaking at 11.6 litres in 2004 before falling to 9.8 litres today.

Drinking within Vs above guidelines

The UK’s Chief Medical Officers’ guidelines classify drinking up to 14 units in a week as ‘low or moderate risk’.

29% of Welsh, 27% of English and 23% of Scottish drinkers consume alcohol at an increasing and higher risk, meaning that they imbibe more than 14 units in a week.

Sources: Health Survey for England 2018, NHS Digital; Scottish Health Survey (2018); National Survey Wales (2018–19)
The regions with the highest proportion of male drinkers who drink at increasing and higher risk levels are the North West and the North East (35%). Both Yorkshire & the Humber and London contain the lowest proportion of male drinkers who drink at increasing and higher risk levels (23%).

Source: Health Survey for England 2018, NHS Digital | Scottish Health Survey 2018, Table 3.2 | StatsWales, National Survey for Wales
The region with the highest proportion of female drinkers who drink at increasing and higher risk levels is the North East (18%).

London contains the lowest proportion of female drinkers who drink at increasing and higher risk levels (10%).

Source: Health Survey for England 2018, NHS Digital | Scottish Health Survey 2018, Table 3.2 | StatsWales, National Survey for Wales
Drinking frequency

In 2017:

- **58%** of Brits drank on at least one day in the last week.
- **10%** of drinkers drank on at least five days in the week.

Source: Office for National Statistics | Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, General Lifestyle Survey and General Household Survey; Drinking Habits Among Adults 2017
Drinking frequency trends

Although the majority of Brits drank alcohol in the last week (62% males, 52% females), there are fewer regular drinkers than a decade ago.

The proportion of people who drank alcohol on five or more days in the last week also fell for both sexes – from 22% to 12% among males and 12% to 8% among females.

Source: Office for National Statistics | Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, General Lifestyle Survey and General Household Survey; Drinking Habits Among Adults 2017
Drinking frequency trends

In 2017, 20% of people in Great Britain declared themselves teetotal.
# Drinking habits, by economic activity

## As a proportion (%) of the whole population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Activity</th>
<th>Teetotal</th>
<th>Drank on at least one day in the last week</th>
<th>Drank on at least five days in the last week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In employment</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO unemployed*</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically inactive*</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## As a proportion (%) of drinkers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Activity</th>
<th>Those who binge drank (exceeded 8/6 units) on heaviest drinking day in the last week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In employment</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO unemployed*</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically inactive*</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those in employment are most likely to drink on at least one day in the last week. They are also half as likely as those who are not in employment to abstain from alcohol.

Economically inactive people (eg students, pensioners) are most likely to drink on at least five days in that week. They are also least likely to binge drink on their heaviest drinking day.

*International Labour Organisation (ILO) definitions of economic activity have been used. Unemployed people are those who are not in work, but are looking for work, while economically inactive people are those who are neither in work nor looking for work. Numbers do not add up to 100 because they do not include those who are neither teetotal nor drank in the last week.
Drinking habits, by occupation

### As a proportion (%) of the whole population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Managerial and professional</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Routine and manual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teetotal</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drank on at least one day in the last week</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drank on at least five days in the last week</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### As a proportion (%) of drinkers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Managerial and professional</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those who binge drank (exceeded 8/6 units) on heaviest drinking day in the last week</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of those in employment, the managerial and professional classes drink most frequently.

Although routine and manual workers are most likely to abstain from drinking, they are most likely to binge drink on the heaviest day in the last week.

Source: Office for National Statistics | Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, General Lifestyle Survey and General Household Survey; Drinking Habits Among Adults 2017
Drinking habits, by income

In 2017, 46% of the lowest income earners drank alcohol in the last week, rising to 79% of those earning £40,000 or more.

The highest income earners were also most likely to drink on at least five days in the last week.

Low income drinkers were least likely to binge drink on their heaviest drinking day, and most likely to abstain from alcohol altogether.

Source: Office for National Statistics | Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, General Lifestyle Survey and General Household Survey; Drinking Habits Among Adults 2017
Types of drink consumed

In 2017:

Men were most likely to consume normal strength beer / stout / lager / cider on their heaviest drinking day of the week.

Women were most likely to consume wine on their heaviest drinking day of the week.

On-trade versus off-trade consumption

Off-trade consumption (alcohol bought from retailers) has increased by 1.3 litres, and is now more than twice that of alcohol sold in the on-trade.

On-trade consumption among adults in the UK (ie drinking alcohol sold in pubs, nightclubs and hotels) declined 1.9 litres per person, and is now at its lowest level this century.

The disparity between on and off-trade consumption among adults has widened since 2000.

References

• British Beer & Pub Association  Statistical Handbook
• UK Department of Health  UK Chief Medical Officers’ Alcohol Guidelines Review – Summary of the proposed guidelines
• NHS Digital  Health Survey for England
• The Scottish Government  Scottish Health Survey
• The Welsh Government  National Survey Wales
• Office for National Statistics  Drinking Habits Among Adults