

Drinkaware Monitor 2020

Focus on Scotland



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Drinkaware is a charity providing impartial, evidence-based information, advice and practical resources to help people make better choices about their drinking. To support its work in this area, Drinkaware utilises research and evidence to understand the prevalence of different drinking behaviours within the population, as well as the experiences and attitudes of drinkers.

Every year, Drinkaware conducts research into the drinking attitudes and behaviours of the UK adult population. In 2020, the research was conducted at a time when many people in the UK were living under restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic. The 2020 Monitor therefore provides a unique insight into people's relationship with alcohol (and other health behaviours) during this unprecedented time.

This study was carried out on behalf of Drinkaware by YouGov between 27 August to 15 September 2020. The total sample size was 9,046 UK adults, including 1,318 in Scotland. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

This summary report focuses on the drinking attitudes and behaviours of adults in Scotland in comparison to all UK adults aged 18+. The full Drinkaware Monitor 2020 report covers findings for the UK as a whole¹.

State of the nation

Levels of alcohol consumption and frequency of drinking in Scotland remain consistent with those reported in our 2019 Monitor². Thirty-three percent of adults in Scotland were drinking two to three times a week or more (35% in 2019) and 13% were drinking four times a week or more (15% in 2019).

There are also no significant changes in the overall prevalence of harmful drinking as determined by AUDIT-C score³. By this measure, three-fifths (59%) of the adult population in Scotland are classified as low risk and a quarter (24%) as increasing risk. Around one-in-seven (16%) are higher risk drinkers. Higher risk drinkers are twice as likely to be male than female (22% vs 11%).

However, in comparison to all UK adults, Scotland has fewer frequent drinkers; those drinking two to three times a week or more (33% vs 41%). In addition, Scotland also has a lower proportion of medium or high risk drinkers (those drinking 15+ units per week) at 18% vs. 20%, but this difference is not statistically significant, and caution must be taken.

¹ <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/research/drinkaware-monitor-2020-drinking-and-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

² <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/research/research-and-evaluation-reports/drinkaware-monitor-2019-drinking-behaviours-and-peer-pressure>

³ The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C) is a three-question alcohol screening test that identifies individuals drinking at hazardous levels. A risk score is determined by the following brackets: 'low risk' (scoring 0-4 through the AUDIT-C questionnaire); 'increasing risk' drinkers scoring 5-7, and 'higher risk' drinkers scoring 8-12.

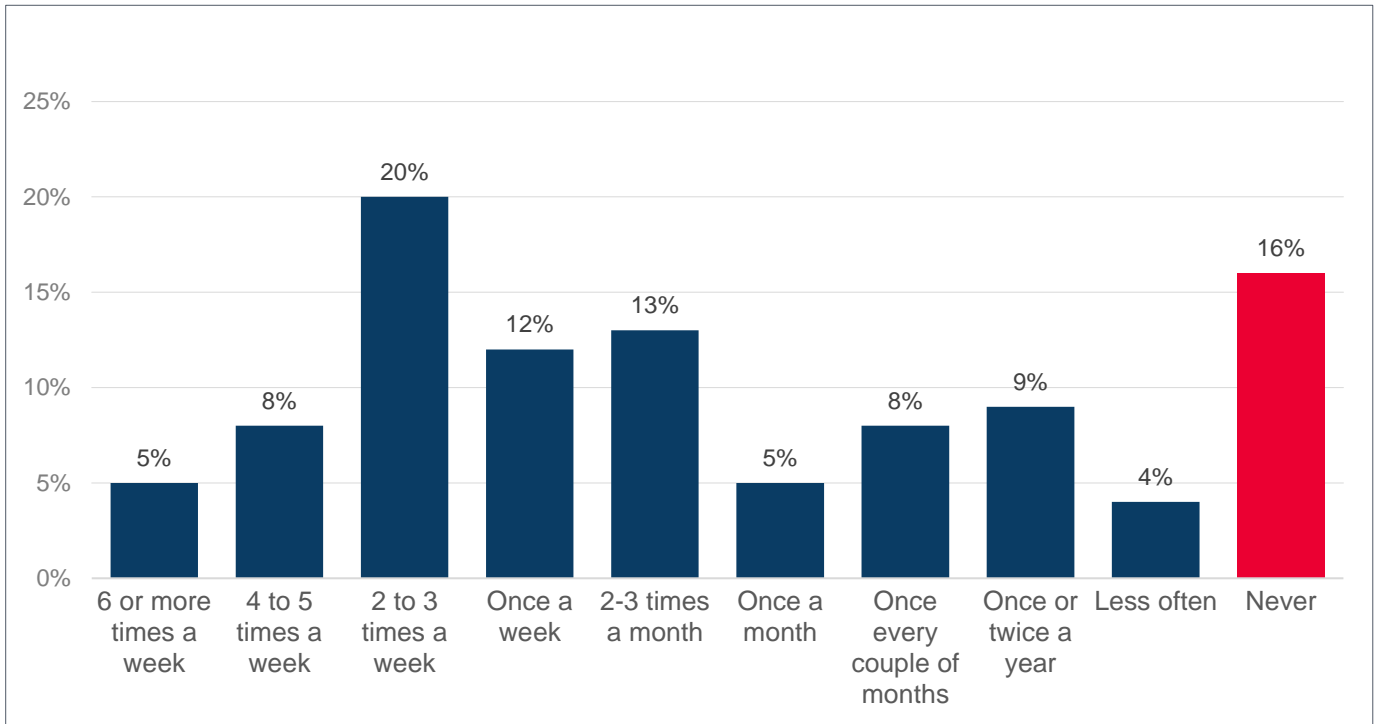


Figure 1: Frequency of drinking alcohol among Scottish adults (base: 1,318)

Drinking during lockdown

One of the key aims of the Drinkaware Monitor 2020, was to understand the impact of drinking during lockdown. As shown in Figure 2, almost three in 10 (29%) adult drinkers in Scotland drank more alcohol than usual during the early stage of lockdown (late March to June) — significantly more than all UK adults (26%). In the latter stage of lockdown (July to August) this reduced substantially to 13% drinking more than usual, comparable to levels observed across the UK (15%). Similarly, one in 10 (10%) adult drinkers in Scotland, drank more than normal throughout both stages of lockdown restrictions (March to August).

A significant group of people also drank less over the lockdown period. In the earlier months, 24% of people drank less than normal, increasing to 29% in the period from July to August.

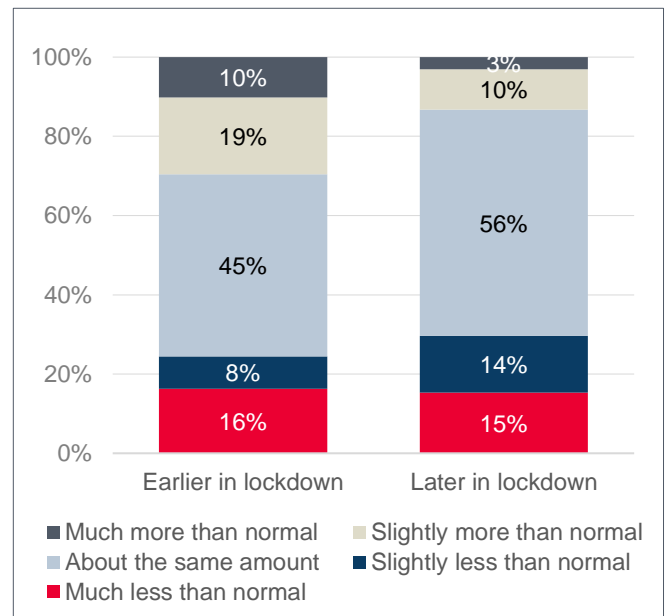


Figure 2: Amount drunk in lockdown compared to normal (base: 1,115)

When we look to see who continued to drink at high levels throughout the pandemic, higher risk drinkers in Scotland are the most likely to have drunk more than normal throughout (22%). Their drinking behaviours changed with more drinking on more days of the week than usual (43% compared with 20% of all drinkers in Scotland) and drinking earlier in the day than usual (21% compared with 10% of all drinkers).

The most common reasons adults in Scotland gave for drinking more during lockdown were having more time available (50%) and less structure to their day or week (50%). Additional reasons included:

- To help with stress or anxiety (37%)
- Drinking more to relieve boredom or for something to do (38%)

When we look to see who was drinking more during the earlier part and then latter part of lockdown, we do see a shift in age. Younger adults (aged 25-34) were more likely than other age groups to report drinking more than usual during the early stage of lockdown (39%). However, as lockdown continued, this group appeared to cut back, with the proportion of drinkers aged 25-34 reporting drinking more than usual decreasing to 13% in the latter stage of lockdown. Instead, it is mid-life drinkers (aged 45-54) who were more likely than other age groups to report drinking more than usual during the latter part of lockdown (19%). This could be a result of limited opportunities for younger people to be drinking in pubs, bars and clubs with friends and family, as opposed to drinking at home.

For example, the reasons given for drinking less than normal were not seeing friends and family or having social occasions (60%) and not going out or going to venues (57%). A quarter (26%) report trying to improve physical health generally.

Impact of the pandemic on other health behaviours

Not only did many people use alcohol to cope during lockdown, but almost one quarter (23%) ate less healthily and around one third (35%) gained weight. This is significantly more than all UK adults (19% and 30% respectively). Women in Scotland are more likely to report eating less healthily (27% vs 18%) and having gained weight than men (39% vs 31%).

Across the UK and within Scotland, we can see that unhealthy behaviours are also linked to alcohol consumption. For example, those who had eaten less healthily and/or gained weight are more likely have been drinking more than usual both in the earlier and later part of lockdown restrictions.

- 31% of those drinking more in early lockdown are eating less healthily vs 19% drinking the same amount
- 52% of those drinking more in early lockdown gained weight vs 27% drinking the same amount
- The pattern is consistent during the latter stage of lockdown

The impact of lockdown on people's mental health cannot be understated and the picture in Scotland echoes that seen across the UK. For example, around one-sixth of all adults in Scotland (17%) feel that the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health to a large or very large extent; this group is also more likely to have been drinking more than normal during the earlier stages of lockdown (28%).

Furthermore, as shown in Figure 3, specific mental health problems have also increased during lockdown with more people in Scotland experiencing stress (42%), anxiety (42%) and depression (40%) compared to before the pandemic.

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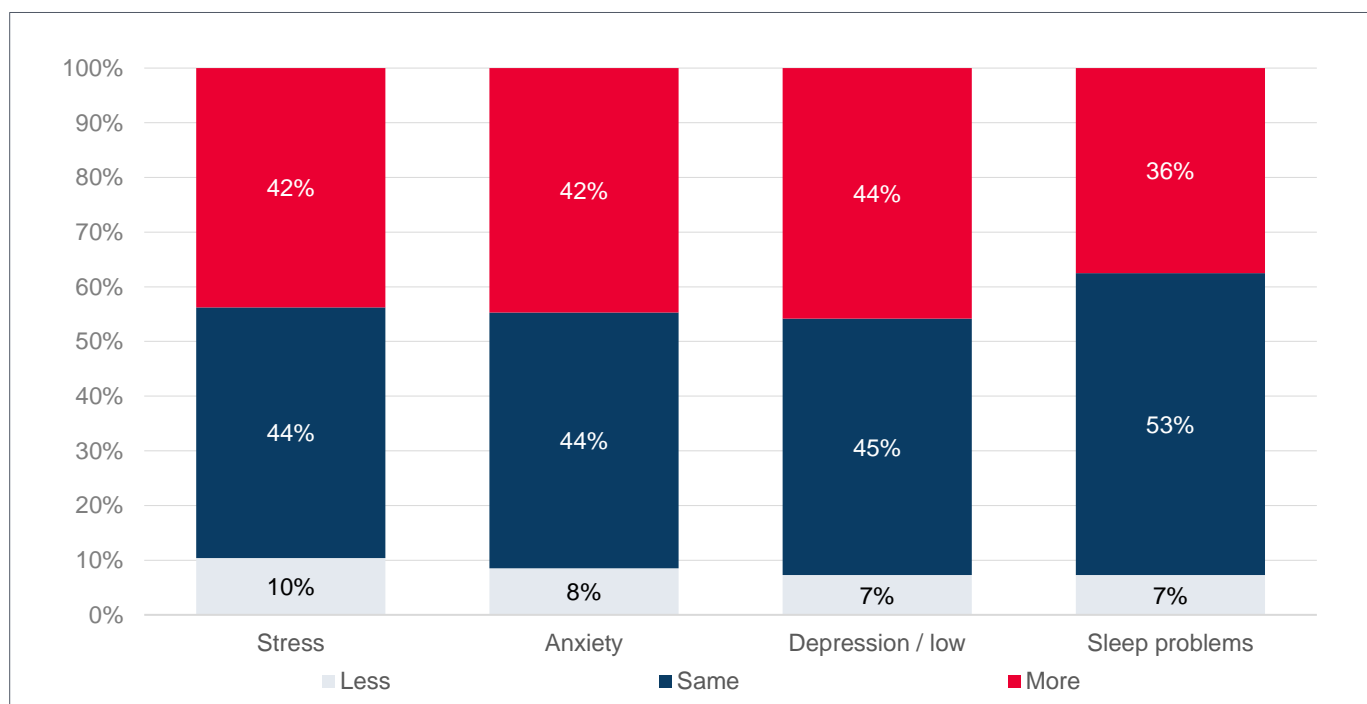


Figure 3: Experience of changes to mental health during lockdown (base 1,318)

Worryingly, when comparing higher risk drinkers in Scotland to lower risk drinkers, we see that they are more likely to have experienced depression (45% vs 38%) and sleep problems (39% v 36%) highlighting the interrelationship between alcohol and mental health issues.

Intention to cut back

Respondents were also asked if they intended to change their drinking as lockdown restrictions eased compared to during the lockdown. While over half (55%) intend to continue drinking the same amount as during lockdown, one in five (22%) intend to cut down on their drinking compared to during lockdown.

Encouragingly, significantly more people in Scotland who reported drinking more than normal in early lockdown, and then reduced their drinking in the later months, were using moderating strategies, compared to all UK adults. These included taking drink-free days (78% vs 64%) and avoiding drinking alcohol on a 'school or work night' (59% vs 54%).

Summary

This year, the drinking attitudes and behaviours of adults in Scotland generally mirrors that of the UK adult population. There are some indications that the frequency levels of alcohol consumption is lower in Scotland than other parts of the UK, and with that we see slightly lower levels of the Scottish population drinking at higher risk levels (note this difference is not statistically significant so caution must be taken). We are also seeing a higher proportion of drinkers in Scotland taking drink-free days and avoiding alcohol on certain nights of the week, compared to UK drinkers.

However, like many people across the UK, many adults in Scotland turned to alcohol to help them through the pandemic, particularly the earlier stages. Not only were many drinking more than normal, they were also eating more unhealthy foods and putting on weight. This is concerning as many who were drinking more throughout and towards the latter stages are middle aged, higher risk drinkers who were already at higher risk of health harms as a result of their alcohol intake.