

**Drinkaware Monitor 2020**

# **Focus on Northern Ireland**



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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, with 608 in Northern Ireland (NI). 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 NI in comparison to all UK adults aged 18+. The full Drinkaware Monitor 2020 report covers findings for the UK as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

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## State of the nation

Alcohol consumption and frequency of drinking in NI remain consistent with those reported in our 2018 Monitor.<sup>2</sup> Thirty-two percent of adults in NI were drinking two to three times a week or more (31% in 2018) and 11% were drinking four to five times a week or more (12% in 2018).

There were some changes in the overall prevalence of harmful drinking as determined by AUDIT-C score.<sup>3</sup> By this measure, just under three-fifths (58%) of the adult population in NI are classified as low risk (60% in 2018), and just over one quarter (27%) are classified as increasing risk—a higher proportion than in 2018 (22%). That said, the proportion of high-risk drinkers was lower in 2020 compared to 2018, 15% and 19% respectively.

In comparison to all UK adults, NI has statistically fewer frequent drinkers; those drinking four to five times a week or more (11% vs 19%) (Figure 1). In addition, NI has a lower proportion of medium or high-risk drinkers (those drinking 15+ units per week) at 17% vs. 20%, but this difference is indicative rather than statistically significant.

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

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/research/research-and-evaluation-reports/drinkaware-monitor-2018-drinking-behaviour-and-moderation>

<sup>3</sup> 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.

■ Northern. ■ UK

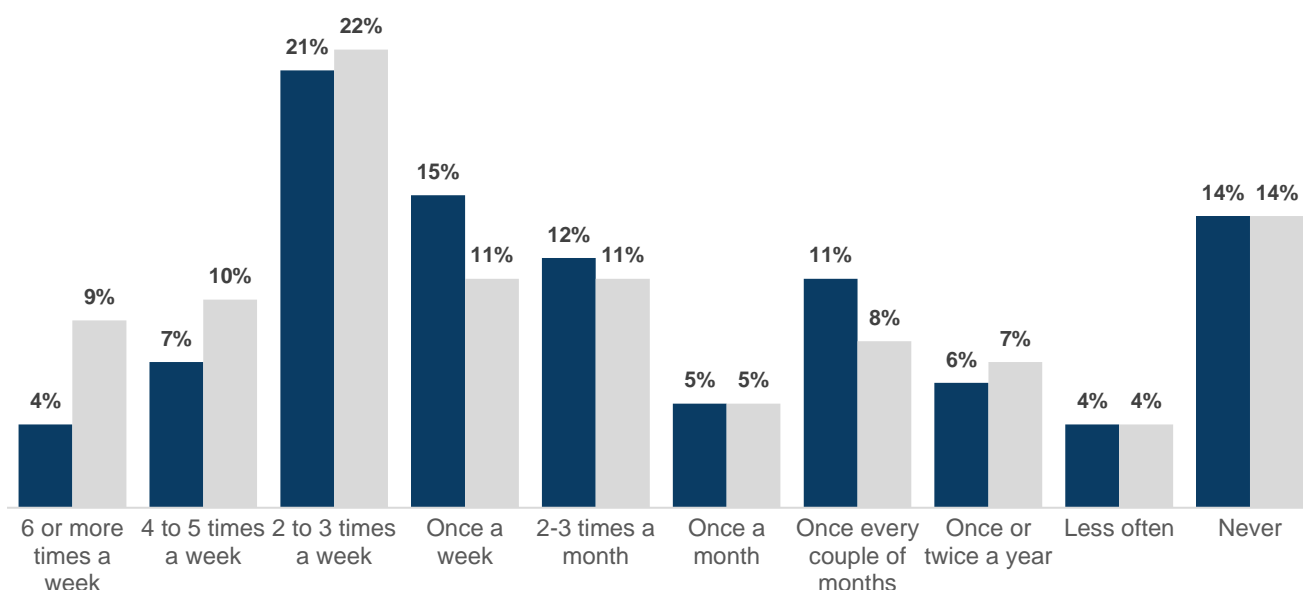


Figure 1: Frequency of drinking alcohol among Northern Ireland adults (Base: 608; UK Base: 9,046)

## 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, three in ten (31%) adult drinkers in NI 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 14% drinking more than usual, which was comparable to levels observed across the UK (15%), suggesting that for some, the change in drinking habits during the early stage of lockdown were situational, rather than a new permanent state of affairs.

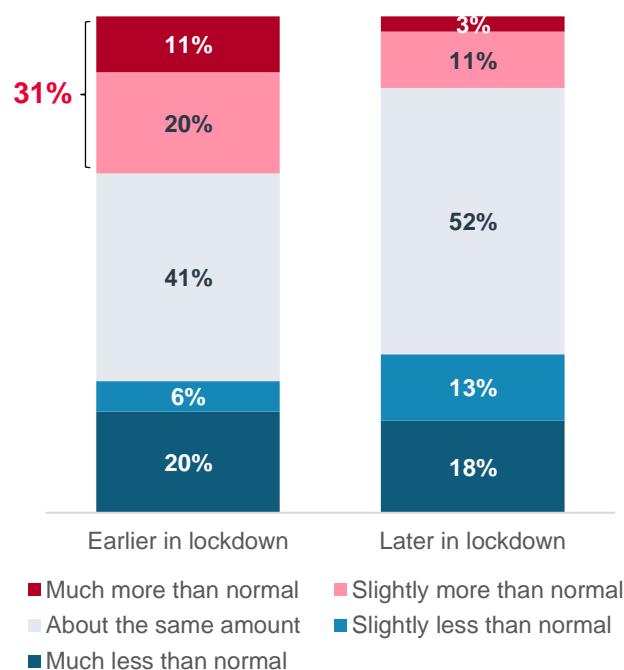


Figure 2: Amount drunk in lockdown compared to normal (Base: All drinkers, n=518)

When we look to see who drank at high levels throughout the pandemic, medium to higher risk drinkers in NI (those drinking more than 15+ units per week) are the most likely to have drunk more than normal at the early stages (57%) and the later stages of the pandemic (28%) compared to lower risk drinkers (24% and 11%) respectively. Their drinking behaviours changed with more drinking on more days of the week than usual (44% compared with 23% of all drinkers in NI) and drinking earlier in the day than usual (23% compared with 9% of all drinkers).

The most common reasons adults in NI gave for drinking more during lockdown were having more time available (53%) and less structure to their day or week (51%). Additional reasons included:

- Drinking more to relieve boredom or for something to do (31%)
- To help with stress or anxiety (29%)

The reasons given for drinking less than normal were not seeing friends and family or having social occasions (62%) and not going out or going to venues (57%) both comparable to the UK (61% and 59% respectively). A quarter (27%) report trying to improve physical health generally and one fifth of NI drinkers (19%) report having less disposable income, due to loss of income. This is more than the total UK (12%).

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## Impact of the pandemic on other health behaviours

Not only did many people use alcohol to cope during lockdown, but almost one quarter (19%)

ate less healthily and one third (33%) gained weight. Women in NI are more likely to report eating less healthily (23% vs 16%) and having gained weight than men (38% vs 28%).

Across the UK and within NI 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.

- 25% of those drinking more in early lockdown are eating less healthily vs 17% drinking the same amount.
- 44% of those drinking more in early lockdown gained weight vs 23% 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 NI echoes that seen across the UK. For example, around one-sixth of all adults in NI (18%) feel that the pandemic has negatively impacted their mental health to a large or very large extent.

Furthermore, as shown in Figure 3, specific mental health problems have also increased during lockdown with more people in NI experiencing stress (49%), anxiety (48%) and depression (45%) compared to before the pandemic. These levels are higher than the UK total (anxiety 42%, stress, 43%, depression, 40%), and more so for women than men in NI (stress, 55% vs 44%; anxiety, 57% vs 40%; depression, 50% vs 39%, respectively).

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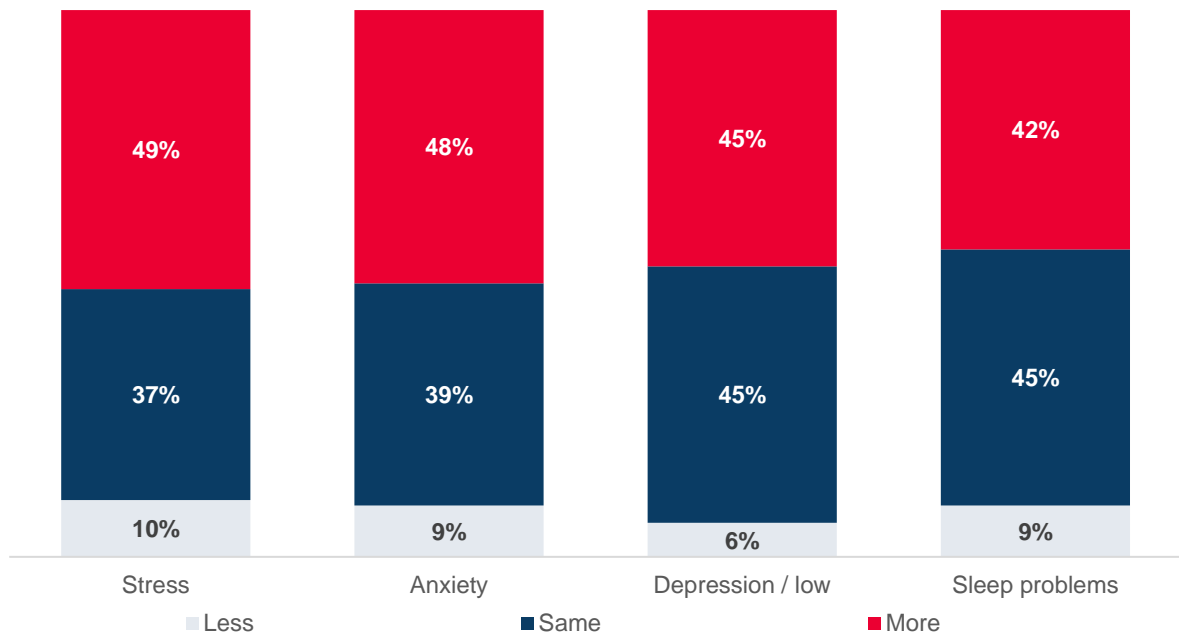


Figure 3: Experience of changes to mental health during lockdown (Base: 608)

### 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 just under half (48%) intend to continue drinking the same amount as during lockdown, just over a quarter (27%) intend to cut down on their drinking compared to during lockdown—higher than the UK average (22%).

The most popular moderating strategies for all adult drinkers in NI were taking drink-free days (65%), avoiding drinking alcohol on a 'school/work night' (55%), and drinking within the guidelines (42%).

### Summary

This year, the drinking attitudes and behaviours of adults in NI generally mirrors that of the UK adult population. Although similar to Scotland, there are some indications that the frequency levels of alcohol consumption are lower in NI than other parts of the UK.

However, like many people across the UK, many adults in NI turned to alcohol to help them through the pandemic, particularly during the early stage of lockdown. Not only were many drinking more than normal, they were also eating less healthily and putting on weight. We also see indications that people in NI experienced a greater level of stress, anxiety and depression compared to those in the UK more generally.