

2024 Technical report on Alcohol

Summary report

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Luz M León, Luisa M López, Alberto Domínguez, Begoña Brime

OEDA External Technical Expert

Noelia Llorens

In Spain, alcohol is the most widely consumed psychoactive substance in the general population at all ages. In general terms, its consumption is more frequent among men than among women and decreases with increasing age. Except in young people, where the opposite is true.

In our country, 3 out of every 4 **students aged 14-18 years** recognize having drunk alcohol at some time in their lives; also, at some time in the last year; and more than half of them declare recent alcohol consumption (in the last month). In this age group, alcohol consumption is somewhat more frequent among girls than among boys, with a gap that has been widening in recent years. And for both sexes, the prevalence of consumption increases with age, rising from 36.5% among 14-year-old students to 73.8% at 18 years of age.

But in addition to the extent of this habit, certain intensive consumption patterns are of concern, such as self-reported drunkenness and binge drinking. These episodes are associated with the practice of "botellón", and occur frequently in both boys and women. Referring to the last month, 19.7% of 14-18 year-old students reported "botellón", 20.8% reported have gotten drunk, and 28.2% acknowledged binge drinking. Episodes of heavy alcohol consumption pose an added risk to the risk that alcohol intake already entails, both for health and for the development of other risky behaviors, such as driving or riding in a vehicle driven under the influence of alcohol, getting into fights or having unprotected sex.

As is to be expected, this situation of high prevalence of alcohol consumption among young people is accompanied by a low perception, on their part, of the risk involved in its consumption. Of every 10 students, 6 consider that drinking 5 or 6 beers/alcoholic beverages on weekends can cause many or quite a few problems, and that daily alcohol consumption (drinking 1 or 2 beers/alcoholic beverages every day) is dangerous. This indicates a certain normalization of the drinking habit and may be both a cause and

a consequence of the spread of this habit. Another factor encouraging alcohol consumption among young people is the ease with which they can obtain alcoholic beverages: 92.9% of them do not perceive any difficulty in obtaining them, a scenario that has hardly changed in the last two decades.

Evolutionarily, the frequency of alcohol consumption among young people has been decreasing since 2012, and this should be a motivation to continue working to reduce consumption in this population group.

On the other hand, prevention policies should even consider consumption at younger ages, since among **students aged 12 and 13 years**, who are in 1st and 2nd year of ESO, 34.6% recognize having consumed alcohol at some time in their lives, 30.6% recognize consumption in the last year, and 21.5% consumption in the last month. These prevalences are very similar in both sexes and higher at 13 than at 12 years of age. Intensive consumption also occurs at these ages: in the last year, 8.3% of students aged 12 and 13 admit having done "botellón" and 5.8% have been drunk. All these data show the normalization of the consumption of alcoholic beverages and the ease of access to them long before they reach the age of majority.

As for the **general population** aged 15-64 years, alcohol consumption is widespread: 93.2% of them report having consumed alcoholic beverages at some time in their lives, 76.4% at some time in the last year and 64.5% in the last month. Furthermore, 9.0% of people aged 15-64 years acknowledge daily alcohol consumption in the last month, this last prevalence being the only one with a downward trend in the time series of the EDADES survey, which now spans more than two decades. The average age of onset of alcohol consumption in this population group is 16.5 years in 2022, slightly lower than the age of onset observed throughout the historical series.

With respect to sociodemographic factors, in the general population aged 15-64 years, alcohol consumption is more frequent in men than in women, decreases with age from 25-34 years of age, and increases with educational level. It should be noted, however, that daily alcohol consumption is more frequent as age increases, and in these persons the level of education is also lower.

Regarding the type of beverage, in general, beer is the most consumed by both men and women, but men consume almost twice as much as women.

As patterns of special risk in the general population aged 15-64 years, in 2022, 16.7% of drunkenness in the last year and 6.4% in the last month were registered, as well as 15.4% of *binge drinking*. These heavy drinking patterns are more frequent among men and the younger the age. In addition, 1.6% of women reported having consumed alcohol while pregnant.

Among the measures to combat alcohol consumption, 7 out of 10 individuals agree with the inclusion of warnings on the packaging of alcoholic beverages about the damage that consumption can cause to the body.

In addition to the general population, there are certain population groups that, due to their special characteristics, require specific attention in the fight against substance abuse. For example, **the prison population deprived of liberty**. In them, according to the latest edition of the ESDIP survey (2022), alcohol is the psychoactive substance most consumed prior to their admission to prison, and the one that shows the greatest reduction after admission. Of the prison population, 54.5% reported consuming alcohol in the month prior to entering prison, while 2.0% stated that they had consumed it in prison in the last month. Consumption in prison is more widespread among men and among those under 35 years of age. Comparing with the general population aged 15 to 64 years, alcohol is the only substance with a lower prevalence of consumption in the last year in the prison population before entering prison (60.3%) than in the general population (76.4%).

Attending to other sources reporting on alcohol consumption in our country, data from the Tax Agency show a general upward trend in the total volume of **alcoholic beverage sales** since 2015, with 5,764 million litres sold in 2022. Alcohol tax collection also reaches in 2022 the maximum values of the historical series studied. The percentage of pure alcohol in each type of beverage has remained fairly stable in those years. Finally, beer is the beverage that accounts for the largest percentage of total sales volume (70.4% of the total in 2022), and it is also the one that accounts for the largest amount of pure alcohol per capita, followed by wine and, at a considerable distance, beverages derived from it.

In this context of widespread alcohol consumption in the population, the data on **consumption defined as risky** by different health organizations are of particular concern. According to the AUDIT scale, in 2022, 6.0% of the Spanish population aged 15 to 64 years had risky alcohol consumption, which makes it possible to estimate that in 2022 there were approximately 1,900,000 risky alcohol consumers in Spain. If risk consumption is defined in terms of average daily or weekly consumption, 3.9% of the population aged 15-64 years would have engaged in risk consumption. In general, risk drinking is more frequent in men and among younger people.

In terms of the **consequences of alcohol consumption**, the need for treatment to control the dependence developed on alcohol, hospital emergency care related to alcohol consumption, and mortality associated with alcohol consumption stand out.

In 2021, alcohol was responsible for 36.2% of admissions to treatment for substance abuse in the drug dependence and addiction care network in our country, with a total of 25,140 admitted. Of these, almost 3 out of 4 were men. In addition, alcohol was present, together with other psychoactive substances, in 41.4% of hospital emergency episodes related to substance use, affecting mainly people under 25 years of age. This percentage reached 55% when considering emergency cases in which alcohol was detected as the only psychoactive substance. It was also one of the substances most frequently detected in the toxicological analyses of deaths with judicial intervention related to intentional substance use (36.4% of cases), with a slightly higher frequency in men than in women. It is important to note that in deaths due to acute reaction to substances, alcohol is only recorded when it appears together with some other substance.

Estimates of alcohol-attributable mortality in Spain have recently been updated, including data up to the year 2021. It is estimated that in 2021 there were 13,887 alcohol-attributable deaths in Spain, the vast majority due to cancer or digestive diseases. They are much more frequent in men than in women, and among them occur mainly in risk drinkers. The population risk in 2021, as measured by the average annual age-standardized MAA rate, was 32.9/100,000 person-years (pa), a significant decrease from 2001-2004 (-34.7%). This population risk was considerably higher in men than in women and increased considerably with age from 35-44 years onwards. Of all deaths from all causes in our country in 2021, 3.3% were attributable to alcohol (4.5% of those occurring in men and 1.6% in women), demonstrating that alcohol consumption continues to represent a significant burden of disease and death.

Finally, we highlight in this monograph the usefulness of applying new tools, such as **wastewater analysis** for epidemiological purposes, to broaden knowledge of the alcohol consumption situation in our country, since it allows us to estimate its consumption in a population and, in serial analyses, to be able to monitor it. The results of this analysis show that the global weekly median of ethanol consumption is between 8.8 L/day/1,000 inhabitants. In the 2018 study, the median stood at 10 L/day/1,000 inhab. suggesting some decrease in consumption, although the different populations studied in 2018 and 2021 must be taken into account.