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New research reveals how UK drinking habits have changed during lockdown

New research commissioned by charity Alcohol Change UK has found that more than one in five (21%) adults who drink alcohol are drinking more often since lockdown began on 23 March. But one in three of those who drink (35%) have reduced how often they drink or stopped drinking altogether.

The representative survey of more than 2,000 people suggests that lockdown is changing the way that the UK drinks at both ends of the scale, with 6% of people surveyed (who have previously drunk alcohol) choosing to abstain from alcohol entirely for the lockdown.

These figures suggest that 8.6 million adults in the UK are drinking more frequently since lockdown, while 14 million are drinking less often or have stopped drinking entirely.

Many people appear to be seeking help when it comes to managing their drinking, with visits to the 'Get help now' section of Alcohol Change UK's website increasing more than fourfold (355%) between 23 March and 13 April compared to the same period last year. In this period the charity has seen more than 11,000 visitors to its [coronavirus and alcohol information and advice hub](#).

More than one in three (38%) drinkers or past drinkers said that they are taking active steps to manage their drinking, suggesting that there is an awareness that lockdown might lead us to drink more frequently or heavily and that many are keen to keep their drinking healthy. People reported:

- Taking drink-free days (14%)
- Being careful with the amount of alcohol they buy (9%)
- Stopping drinking completely for the lockdown (6%)
- Seeking advice online (4%)
- Attending remote support groups (3%)
- Receiving remote 1-1 counselling (3%)
- Using apps to monitor their drinking (2%)

That said, it is the people who were already drinking the least often who have cut down in the greatest number. Nearly half (47%) of people who drank once a week or less have cut down or stopped drinking, compared to just over a quarter (27%) of people who drank two to six times a week, and just one in five (17%) daily drinkers. Worryingly, nearly one in five (18%) daily drinkers have further increased the amount they drink.

Dr Richard Piper, Chief Executive of Alcohol Change UK, said:

"This is the most extensive research yet into drinking during lockdown and it shows that this unprecedented period is having a significant impact on the way the UK drinks.

"More than one in five of us are finding ourselves drinking more frequently in lockdown; many of us use alcohol as our go-to stress reliever, and in this very stressful time it's not surprising that we might find ourselves reaching for a drink more often.

“But at the same time people across the UK are rising to the challenge by taking steps to manage our drinking. More than a third of us are putting in place ways to keep our drinking in hand, ranging from taking drink-free days to using online support groups. We want to come out of lockdown as mentally and physically healthy as we possibly can, and managing our drinking is an important part of that.

“People who are drinking more may be struggling the most when it comes to managing their drinking. If you need more support you can find it even during lockdown; visit our coronavirus and alcohol information and advice hub to find out more.”

Professor Sir Ian Gilmore, Chair of Alcohol Health Alliance UK, said:

“It is good news to see that many people are taking their health seriously during the coronavirus pandemic by reducing their alcohol consumption; a course of action which WHO strongly recommends. Cutting down on alcohol will not only improve our own health but it will help to protect the NHS long-term and so it is important that these healthy trends continue. That said, lockdown will be a difficult experience for many dependent drinkers, those in recovery or those whose alcohol consumption has risen sharply in the last few weeks. If you are concerned about your drinking or the alcohol consumption of someone you know, make sure you reach out for help.”

Lizzie* took on Dry January earlier this year and afterwards remained alcohol-free because she found she didn't like the role alcohol played in her life. She has a young child, and has found staying dry during lockdown challenging:

“I decided I didn't want to drink any more because I realised that alcohol was not serving me well in life, and that I did not have a healthy attitude towards it. I used it to numb me against the bad stuff in my life, but grabbing a glass of wine became my normal even on good days. Being alcohol-free has been hard at times, but my attitude to life has changed for the better, especially as I was able to start therapy. Since lockdown things have been harder. I have had to stop my therapy sessions, and there have been a couple times I have thought, 'I could just drink that whole bottle of prosecco that's still hanging around from Christmas...' Everywhere online people are talking about drinking to respond to our current situation and honestly it breaks my heart, because I don't want to be numb anymore. I'm part of a support group online run by Alcohol Change UK, and I'm using that plus remembering all the positives of getting control of my drinking to help me keep going during lockdown. By removing this one thing from my life, I have gained so much more for myself and for that I am so thankful.”

Additional finding: 3.5 million adults are living in households where alcohol is leading to greater tension or conflict during lockdown

The new research suggests that one person's drinking can and does impact the whole household. One in 14 (7%) people said that their own or someone else's drinking had made the tension in their household worse since lockdown. This suggests that 3.5 million adults are living in households where alcohol is leading to greater tension or conflict.

The figures are even higher for households with children. One in seven people with children under 18 living in their household reported that alcohol had increased tensions, while only 4% felt alcohol had lessened tensions.

Dr Richard Piper said:

"This research shows that alcohol is leading to increased tension in millions of households across the UK, which hints at the wider negative impact that alcohol can have. Successive Governments have had a blind spot on alcohol harm, but the reality is that it's the cause of 1.3m hospital admissions and over 7,000 deaths each year. This harm is avoidable. Taking action on alcohol harm would reduce rates of domestic violence, child neglect, costs to the criminal justice system and – perhaps most significantly at the moment – would hugely benefit the NHS."

Vivienne Evans, Chief Executive of family alcohol and drugs charity Adfam, said:

"These figures support what Adfam is hearing from families during the lockdown. Family and household members are largely unrecognised victims of the harm alcohol can cause; at the best of times they suffer emotional and physical distress, and feel isolated because it's not easy to own up to having a heavy drinker in the household. Adfam's website has information on help and support, and an online peer support forum."

ENDS.

For information and interviews please contact Maddy Lawson, Head of Communications at Alcohol Change UK: maddy.lawson@alcoholchange.org.uk / 07814919946

Notes to editors

*Not her real name.

Research

Total sample size was 2,010 UK adults, of whom 1,555 were regular drinkers before the lockdown began. The survey was carried out online by Opinium, between 8 and 14 April 2020, two weeks after the UK government introduced social distancing measures to tackle the COVID-19 crisis (23 March 2020). The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+). Figures relating to UK population are calculated using ONS mid-year population estimates for 2017 (ONS, Population Estimates for UK: mid-2017, table MYE2); an estimated UK population of 52,078,525 adults aged 18 and over.

Website figures

Alcohol Change UK have developed a hub where people can get information and advice about managing their drinking during lockdown, as well as links to where people can find support and treatment remotely. [Visit the coronavirus and alcohol hub.](#)

Number of visits to the 'Get help now' section of the website 23 March – 13 April:
10,499 vs 2,309

Number of visits to all coronavirus pages in this period:
11,262 (this is higher than the number of people visiting the 'Get help now' section because it includes 3,133 people who visited the [coronavirus alcohol and mental health tips](#), which sits in the blog).

The charity's website overall has seen only an 18% increase in traffic over the same period compared to last year. The biggest source of traffic is organic searches (i.e. people using a search engine to look for terms related to coronavirus and drinking).

About Alcohol Change UK

Alcohol Change UK works for a world free from alcohol harm. We fund, commission and share research; work to ensure more and better support and treatment; encourage better policy and regulation; shift drinking cultures through our campaigns; and work to change drinking behaviours by providing advice and information. [Find out more.](#)

About Adfam

Adfam is the national charity working to improve life for families affected by drugs or alcohol. [Adfam's website](#) has information on help and support, and an online peer support forum.

About the Alcohol Health Alliance UK

The Alcohol Health Alliance UK (AHA) is a coalition of 50 health and alcohol organisations who share a common interest in reducing alcohol-related harm, and who campaign for evidence-based policies to reduce this harm. Members include medical royal colleges, charities, patient representatives and alcohol health campaigners. For more information, please visit: www.ahauk.org.