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New research reveals that without action lockdown drinking habits may be here to stay

New research, commissioned by charity Alcohol Change UK, has found that **more than a quarter (28%) of people who have ever drunk alcohol think they have been drinking more during lockdown**. As pubs reopen and lockdown eases, two in three (66%) expect to continue drinking as they have been during lockdown (49%), or even drink more (17%). Those who have drunk more frequently during lockdown are less likely to say that they will cut down as lockdown eases.

The representative Opinium survey of more than 2,000 people in the UK suggests that **heavier lockdown drinking will not end spontaneously when it eases**.

Those polled included 1,647 current and former drinkers. Unless otherwise stated, percentages in this release refer to this subset of people.

Many have been drinking more frequently during lockdown

One in five (21%) of those who drink alcohol have been drinking more often during lockdown, while fewer than one in ten (9%) have been drinking less often. The amount drunk on the average drinking day does not seem to have changed significantly, with 13% of people drinking more units on the days when they do drink, compared to 12% drinking fewer units.

Those who already drank heavily on drinking days pre-lockdown were more likely to drink even more during lockdown. Thirty-eight per cent of those who typically drank heavily on pre-lockdown drinking days (seven plus units, half or more than the suggested weekly maximum of 14 units) said they drank more during lockdown, compared to just 23% of those who drank two units or less on a typical drinking day.

During lockdown 19% of those surveyed have drunk alcohol as a way to handle stress or anxiety. Parents of under 18s were more likely to say that they had done so (30%) than non-parents (17%) and parents of adult children (11%). Of those who drank more heavily during lockdown (nine plus units on each drinking day), 40% had drunk as a response to stress or anxiety.

Where people have been drinking less, this shift has in many cases been dramatic; 7% of current and former drinkers, or **over three million people across the UK, have stopped drinking completely during lockdown**. Younger people were more likely to go alcohol-free for lockdown, with 11% of 18-34 year olds stopping drinking.

Heavier drinking may not end as lockdown eases

One in five (19%) people who have ever drunk alcohol plan to visit a pub within two weeks of reopening – that's an estimated **eight million people UK-wide**.

As lockdown eases, two in three (66%) people expect to drink more than (17%) or the same as (49%) they did during lockdown, compared to one in three (35%) who expect to drink less.

Those who have drunk more frequently during lockdown are less likely to say that they will cut down as lockdown eases. Six per cent of people say both that they have drunk more than usual

during lockdown and that they expect that to increase still further as lockdown eases. This group of people may need support to change their habits and drink more healthily going forward.

But one in three will take active steps to manage their drinking

During lockdown, **more than one in three (37%) people have taken active steps to manage their drinking**, for example having alcohol-free days (15%), being careful with the amount of alcohol they buy (8%), looking for advice online (4%), or asking their GP for advice and support (3%). One in 50 (2%) people have attended support groups, and the same proportion have received one-to-one counselling online or by phone. **Just one in 100 (1%) have spoken to a friend or family member for advice or support.**

As lockdown eases, **more than one in three (34%) people plan to take active steps to manage their drinking.** Young people are even more likely to be planning to do so, with 46% of 18-34 year-olds planning one or more way to control their drinking.

This is reflected in **the increased number of people seeking help on Alcohol Change UK's website.** Back in April, the charity reported a 355% increase in traffic to the 'Get help now' section of its website compared to the same period the year before (10,499 between 23 March and 13 April 2020 compared to 2,309 in the same period in 2019). This lift in traffic has continued throughout lockdown; for the three-month period 23 March to 23 June, **traffic to the 'Get help now' section was 242% higher than the same period last year**, with 38,388 visitors in total compared to 11,219 in 2019. For the website as a whole traffic was up 60%.

As it stands, only one in five dependent drinkers in the UK are receiving treatment¹. These figures suggest that, post lockdown, we may see a significant increase in the number of people seeking support with their drinking.

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

"From the very start of lockdown, charities and treatment services have warned of the impact on people's drinking. This research shows that we were right to worry. One in five of us has drunk more often than usual over the past three months, and this research suggests that those drinking more often during lockdown are less likely than others to cut back as it eases.

"But the good news is that one in three of us are acknowledging that drinking is a concern and taking active steps to manage our drinking during lockdown. One in three are also planning to manage our drinking actively as the pubs reopen and lockdown eases, putting in place plans like drink-free days, keeping an eye on the amount of alcohol we buy, and getting support online or from our GPs."

Despite having an increasing problem with her drinking before lockdown, **Fiona Alexander**, aged 33 from Liverpool, has worked hard to control her drinking while at home:

"Before lockdown, I was overwhelmed. Christmas saw me working frantically to submit my PhD thesis whilst attempting to push through the purchase of a first house. Although life at last seemed to be falling into place, I found myself unable to relax. I drank alone, drifting from bar to bar, or at home, holed up with a bottle or two of wine. When my grandma died in early March, I felt I just couldn't cope. And then came the lockdown. I knew I didn't want alcohol to wreck my happiness and health – and so I decided to set myself a target of 100

days dry. When that felt impossibly out of reach, I revised it down to 60. I've just hit 101. I'm not going to commit to never drinking again. Rather, I'm committing to mindful drinking, taking it a day, a week, a month a time, setting achievable targets along the way.

"When you're drinking too much and feel powerless to change, it's so easy to think that you're the only one – but there are so many people out there. I've found connecting with others in Alcohol Change UK's online communities to be really helpful. I also use their Try Dry app on my phone to record my drinking and dry days. I use it to keep myself accountable and set goals, and I find it very motivating. I also stock up on alcohol-free alternatives – I have a particular favourite sparkling alcohol-free wine from Tesco, and I also like alcohol-free gin and tonic.

"How do I feel about pubs and bars reopening? It doesn't fill me with trepidation – it's heartening to see more life on the streets after weeks of an eerie ghost-town atmosphere. My home city of Liverpool also boasts some beautiful historic pubs which I love. That said, I won't be rushing to a pub at the first opportunity. I'll be looking for venues with clear customer-service strategies in place, offering an imaginative range of alcohol-free as well as alcoholic drinks. I'm actually optimistic – the need to be mindful about social distancing, and measures such as pre-booking a time-limited slot online, could actually prove very helpful as I work to change old unhealthy drinking patterns."

Addressing the need for ongoing support for those who have found themselves struggling with their drinking during lockdown, **Dr Richard Piper** said:

"The Government must take the harm caused by alcohol seriously. In England in 2018/19, there were 1.26 million hospital admissions related to alcohol consumptionⁱⁱ, and every day in the UK more than twenty people die as a result of alcohol harmⁱⁱⁱ. With many people, including already-heavy drinkers, emerging from lockdown drinking more than before, this harm is only set to worsen.

"But none of this is inevitable. Research published on 2 July by King's College London has shown an association between increases in alcohol-related hospital admissions and decreases in spending on alcohol services since they came under the responsibility of local authorities in 2012. By properly funding alcohol treatment services the Government can save the NHS money, aid the national recovery effort and save lives."

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

"It is concerning that one in five drinkers increased their alcohol consumption even very early into lockdown. If we are to emerge from this pandemic as a healthier society, the Government must start planning a long-term prevention strategy to empower people across the UK to make healthy lifestyle choices and to ensure that those who are drinking at dangerous levels get the support they need.

"As pubs begin to open this weekend, the public must ensure that they take care to follow social distancing measures and stay within the Chief Medical Officers' drinking guidelines in order to protect our NHS as well as their own health."

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

ENDS.

For information and interviews please contact Maddy Lawson, Head of Communications at Alcohol Change UK: maddy.lawson@alcoholchange.org.uk / 07848 473 732

Notes to editors

Research

Total sample size was 2,002 UK adults, of whom 1,647 were current or former drinkers before lockdown. The survey was carried out online by Opinium, between 26 and 29 June 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.

Results will be available [here](#) from 00:01 on Friday 3 July.

This research follows up on earlier research commissioned by Alcohol Change UK, conducted two weeks after the UK government introduced social distancing measures to tackle the COVID-19 crisis (23 March 2020). Results of this earlier research can be found [here](#).

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.](#)

ⁱ Public Health England (2018). Adult substance misuse treatment statistics 2018 to 2019.

ⁱⁱ Public Health England (2019). Local Alcohol Profiles for England. Hospital admissions.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alcohol Health Alliance (2019). Alcohol harm factsheet.