

Alcohol-related harm is a major public health issue in the European Union. Alcohol use is responsible for some 255 000 to 290 000 deaths each year across EU countries (WHO, 2019; IHME, 2019). High alcohol consumption is associated with increased risk of heart diseases and stroke, liver cirrhosis, certain cancers and foetal alcohol disorders, but even moderate alcohol consumption increases the long-term risk of developing such diseases. Alcohol also contributes to morbidity and mortality through accidents and injuries, violence, homicide and suicide.

Measured through sales data, overall alcohol consumption stood at 10 litres of pure alcohol per adult on average across EU countries in 2018, down from 11 litres in 2008 (Figure 4.7). Latvia and Austria have the highest level of alcohol consumption, with over 12 litres per adult, followed by the Czech Republic, France, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Luxembourg, with over 11 litres per adult. Greece, Sweden, Italy and Malta have relatively low levels of consumption, below 8 litres of pure alcohol per adult.

Over the past decade, alcohol consumption has decreased in most EU countries, with the largest reductions in Estonia, Greece and Lithuania (reductions of about 3 litres per adult). It has slightly increased in Bulgaria, Latvia and Malta, although it remains well below the EU average in Malta.

Although overall alcohol consumption per capita is a useful measure to assess long-term trends, it is also important to consider drinking patterns across population groups to identify those who drink the most and are most at risk of alcohol-related disorders. Men consume about four times more alcohol than women on average across EU countries (WHO, 2019). Beyond quantity, drinking frequency and intensity are also crucial to measure the extent of harmful consumption. In 2016, one-third (33%) of adults on average across EU countries reported having had six drinks or more on a single occasion during the last month (Figure 4.8). This proportion was three times higher among men than women (51% compared with 17%). Men and women in Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, the Czech Republic and Estonia were more likely to report episodic heavy drinking, with the proportion reaching over 40%. Heavy drinking is on the rise in many countries among young adults and women especially. Men in lower socio-economic groups are also more likely to drink heavily than those in higher socio-economic groups, while it is the opposite for women (OECD, 2015).

Many European countries have implemented a range of policies to limit alcohol consumption, including taxation, restrictions on the availability of alcohol, bans on alcohol advertising, and public health campaigns (OECD, 2015). Recent innovative measures include minimum unit pricing, regulation of digital alcohol marketing, and alcohol labelling. Minimum pricing of alcohol units, introduced in Scotland in 2018, has been associated with a reduction in alcohol purchases, especially among households that bought the most alcohol (O'Donnell et al, 2019).

The confinement measures following the COVID-19 pandemic in the first half of 2020 had at least a temporary impact on people's lifestyle and drinking habits. Different population groups reported either an increase or a decrease in alcohol use. In France and Belgium, the closure of bars and restaurants during the lockdown was associated with an overall reduction in alcohol consumption, especially among young adults. At the same time, other population groups (such as people aged 35-50 and parents of young children) reported having drunk more than usual during the confinement period (Sciensano, 2020; Santé Publique France, 2020).

Definition and comparability

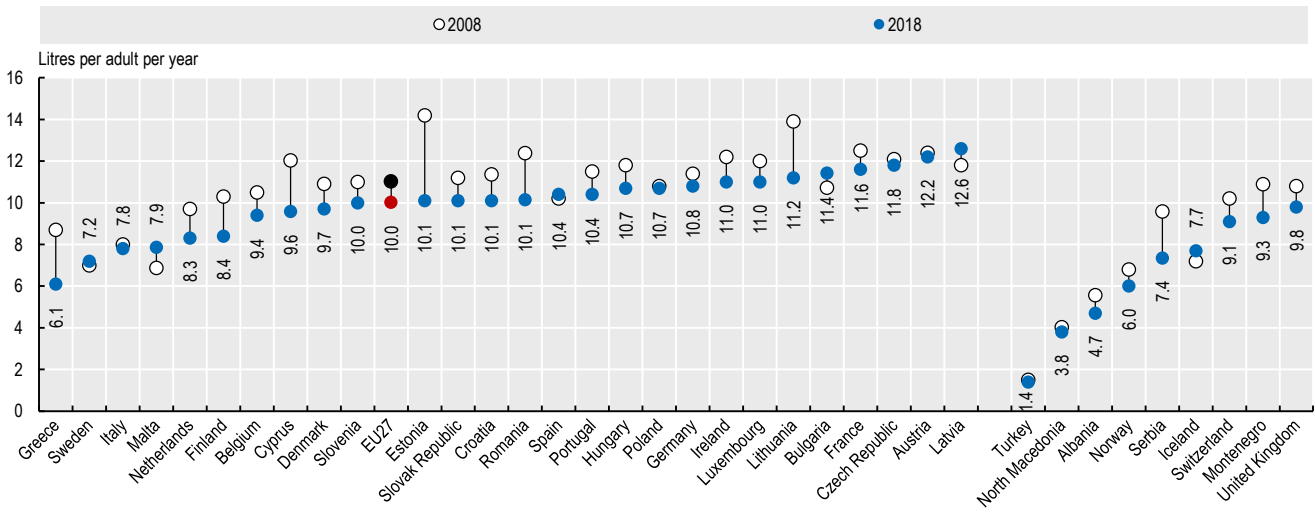
Overall alcohol consumption is defined as annual sales of pure alcohol in litres per person aged 15 years and over. The methodology to convert alcohol drinks to pure alcohol may differ across countries. Official statistics do not include unrecorded alcohol consumption, such as illegal production. In some countries (e.g. Luxembourg), national sales do not accurately reflect actual consumption by residents, since purchases by non-residents may create a significant gap between national sales and consumption. Alcohol consumption in Luxembourg is thus estimated as the average alcohol consumption in France and Germany.

The proportion of heavy episodic drinkers is defined as the share of adults aged 15 years and over who reported having had at least 60 grammes or more of pure alcohol (6 drinks or more) on at least one occasion in the past 30 days.

References

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- WHO (2019), *Status report on alcohol consumption, harm and policy responses in 30 European countries 2019*, WHO Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.

Figure 4.7. Overall alcohol consumption among adults, 2008 and 2018 (or nearest years)

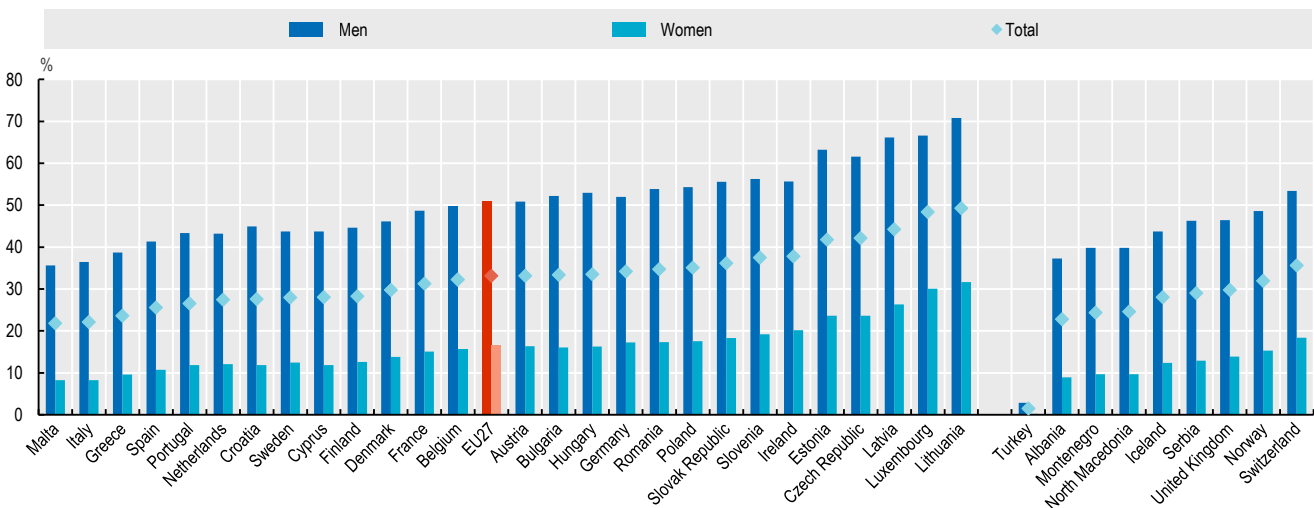


Note: The EU average is unweighted.

Source: OECD Health Statistics 2020, WHO Global Information System on Alcohol and Health for Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Portugal and non-OECD countries.

StatLink <https://stat.link/zb2sw9>

Figure 4.8. Proportion of adults who report heavy episodic drinking in the past 30 days, 2016



Note: The EU average is unweighted.

Source: WHO Global Information System on Alcohol and Health (GISAH), 2019.

StatLink <https://stat.link/x05ynt>



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