

RESEARCH NEWS



Drinking on special occasions shows huge increase on people's typical drinking estimates

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Asking people about their typical alcohol consumption fails to take account of a major increase in their drinking on holidays and special occasions, and this atypical drinking may add an extra 40% to their total alcohol intake, a survey of adults in England has shown.

Researchers asked a nationally representative sample of 6085 people aged 16 and over about their typical drinking and any changes in consumption on what they termed routine atypical days, such as Friday nights, as well as on special occasions such as holidays and celebrations.

The results from the 4604 people who were current drinkers, reported in *BMC Medicine*,¹ showed that drinking on atypical and special occasions added more than 120 million units of alcohol a week to the population's consumption in England. This is equivalent to around 12 million bottles of wine.

The greatest impact was seen among the 25 to 34 year olds with the highest usual consumption, where atypical and special occasions added about 18 units of alcohol a week to the mean consumption by both sexes.

People who reported the lowest typical alcohol consumption (≤ 1 unit/week) also showed a large relative increase in consumption when taking account of the additional alcohol associated with special occasions, up from a mean of 0.4 units a week to 1.1.

The results also showed that drinking on atypical and special occasions accounted for 41.6% of the gap between the amount of alcohol people say that they drink in surveys and the national sales of alcohol in England.

"Typical drinking alone can be a poor proxy for actual alcohol consumption," said the researchers, led by Mark Bellis, of Liverpool John Moores University and Bangor University, Wales. "There is a huge difference between what surveys report

is consumed and how much alcohol is sold in England. Every week, the equivalent of over three quarters of a bottle of wine per drinker goes unaccounted for," he noted.

"The problem is that surveys usually ask about typical drinking. This means [that] summer holidays, bank holidays, weddings and many other special occasions when consumption often increases are left out," Bellis explained. "As a result, nationally we underestimate how much we drink and as individuals we can turn a blind eye to our heavier drinking periods when we calculate personal consumption."

The research group said that better population measures of drinking on holidays and special occasions are needed in national surveys to measure alcohol consumption more accurately and assess the associated health harms.



1 Bellis MA, Hughes K, Jones L, et al. Holidays, celebrations, and commiserations: measuring drinking during feasting and fasting to improve national and individual estimates of alcohol consumption. *BMC Med* 2015; doi:10.1186/s12916-015-0337-0.

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