Edinburgh

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;376:o468<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o468>

Published: 22 February 2022

Covid-19: Pandemic adds to alcohol deaths in Scotland

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Alcohol related deaths increased in Scotland during the pandemic, when restrictions meant fewer people were able to access treatment.

An analysis from Public Health Scotland (PHS) found that total alcohol sales were 9% lower in 2020 compared with the average of the previous three years, mainly because of the closure of pubs, clubs, and restaurants.¹ Despite this, alcohol related deaths rose by 9% overall with the largest increases seen in men, those aged over 45, and the most deprived.

The findings are similar to an earlier study from Public Health England² and point to an increase in higher risk drinking during the pandemic, particularly among those already drinking heavily.

Alcohol related hospital stays fell by 7.3% in Scotland during 2020 with the largest reductions occurring at periods when the most stringent restrictions were in place.

The report said, "Taken together, the evidence presented here and in other studies suggests an uneven effect of the pandemic on alcohol consumption and related health harms. Of concern is the potential that groups with high levels of alcohol consumption before the pandemic may have increased their alcohol consumption further, not had access to or presented at hospital for treatment for alcohol related conditions, and potentially experienced higher mortality as a consequence."

It concluded, "To echo Public Health England's study, tackling alcohol consumption and harms, particularly among high risk groups, should be a critical objective of any covid-19 recovery plans."

That will prove challenging given the extent of alcohol consumption in Scotland. The PHS report shows that, even with a reduction in alcohol sales during the pandemic, 17 units of pure alcohol were sold each week on average for every adult in the country. This is enough to put every adult over the recommended low risk drinking guideline of 14 units.

Elinor Jayne, director of Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems, which was set up by Scotland's medical royal colleges, said, "These data once again highlight the high level of harm caused by alcohol in Scotland. We must now see a real focus on timely services and treatment for those with alcohol problems, with the aim of increasing capacity and accessibility for people quickly to get the support they need to prevent alcohol from harming them."

1 Public Health Scotland. Alcohol sales and harm in Scotland during the covid-19 pandemic. February 2022. www.publichealthscotland.scot/publications/alcohol-sales-and-harm-in-scotland-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.

2 Public Health England. Monitoring alcohol consumption and harm during the covid-19 pandemic. July 2021. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1002627/Alcohol_and_COVID_report.pdf.

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