

## Cutting back on drinking: 2014/15 ABAS

### Background

In 2013/14, one in five (20%) New Zealanders aged 15 years or more who drank alcohol in the past year reported a potentially hazardous alcohol consumption pattern (Ministry of Health, 2014). However, a smaller minority reported having sought or received help to reduce their level of alcohol use (Ministry of Health 2014). Drinkers may experience a range of harms from drinking, with the most common being harm to physical and mental health, injuries, social harms such as problems with friendships and home life, and problems with employment or income (Ministry of Health 2015).

The Health Promotion Agency (HPA) produces communication campaigns aimed at people who may be experiencing consequences from heavy drinking, and encouraging them to think about making changes.<sup>1</sup> This factsheet looks at the extent to which New Zealand adults are considering changing their alcohol consumption and seeking information and support to help them do so.

### Methodology

The responses of adults aged 18-years-and-over (n=3,812) were analysed. Responses were first compared by gender, ethnicity and age group (while controlling for the other demographic factors). Statistically significant differences (p<.05) between subgroups are reported in cases where the differences remained significant after accounting for other factors.

Secondly, responses were compared by all demographic factors and by risky drinking (defined as having consumed seven or more drinks on an occasion in the past month<sup>2</sup>). If differences were no longer significant after risky drinking was included, this is noted in the text.

### Changing drinking pattern

All adult respondents who had drunk alcohol during the previous 12 months (n= 2,773) were asked: "Compared to this time last year, would you say you are now drinking more alcohol, less alcohol or about the same amount of alcohol?" Compared with a year earlier, 9% (7-10%) said they were drinking more, 29% (27-30%) said they were drinking less and 62% (61-64%) said they were drinking about the same amount.

Those more likely to say they were drinking more now than a year ago included:

- 18 to 24-year-olds (27%), compared with 25 to 44-year-olds (10%), 45 to 64-year-olds (5%) and those aged 65 years and over (2%)
- past-month risky drinkers (15%), compared with non-risky drinkers (7%).

Those more likely to say they were drinking less included:

- 18 to 24-year-olds (37%), compared with 45 to 64-year-olds (26%) and those aged 65 years and over (25%)
- Māori (37%) and Pacific people (42%), compared with European/Other (27%).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.alcohol.org.nz/resources-research/campaigns/helpseekers>

<sup>2</sup> The ABAS assesses risky drinking over the past month using a question about "seven or more drinks on a single occasion". This question was based on earlier low-risk drinking advice. For comparability with previous surveys the question has remained unchanged. The low-risk drinking advice has, however, since been updated and recommends a lower threshold (<http://www.alcohol.org.nz/help-advice/advice-on-alcohol/low-risk-alcohol-drinking-advice>).

## Thinking about cutting back on drinking

All adult respondents who reported drinking at least two alcoholic drinks on an occasion in the past three months (n= 2,117) were asked whether they had thought about cutting back on how much they drink after that occasion, or at any time over the previous 12 months. These responses were then confirmed.

Overall, four in ten (39%, 37-41%) adults reported that they had thought about cutting back on drinking at some point in the previous 12 months. Those more likely to report this included:

- males (41%), compared with females (36%)
- all younger age groups (43% of 18 to 44-year-olds and 38% of 45 to 64-year-olds), compared with those aged 65 years and over (28%)
- Māori (46%), compared with European/Other (37%)
- past-month risky drinkers (54%), compared with non-risky drinkers (34%)
- those whose drinking pattern had changed in the past year: those who were drinking less (53%) and those who were drinking more (47%) were more likely to report such thoughts, compared with those who said their drinking behaviour had not changed (30%).

When risky drinking behaviour was accounted for, the differences by gender, ethnicity and 18 to 24-year-olds compared with older adults (65 years and over) were no longer significant.

## Looking for information about cutting back on drinking

All adult respondents who reported drinking at least two alcoholic drinks on an occasion in the past three months (n= 2,117) were asked: "In the last 12 months, have you looked or asked for advice, information or help on how to cut back on your drinking?", followed by "Has anyone given you any advice, information or help on how to cut back on your drinking?"

Overall 4% (3-5%) reported that they had looked for information, and 8% (7-9%) said that they had been

given information about cutting back on drinking. Over half of those who had looked for information also reported that someone had given them information or advice (55%). Only a small proportion of those who had not looked for information themselves said that they had been given information or advice (6%).

Those more likely to say they had looked for advice, information or help about cutting back included:

- males (5%), compared with females (3%)
- 18 to 24-year-olds (6%), compared with those aged 65 years and over (1%)
- people of Pacific ethnicities (12%), compared with European/Other (3%)
- past-month risky drinkers (7%), compared with non-risky drinkers (2%)
- those whose drinking behaviour had changed in the past 12 months (7% of those who had been drinking more and 6% of those who had been drinking less), compared with 3% of those whose drinking had not changed.

Gender, age and ethnic differences were no longer significant when risky drinking behaviour was accounted for.

Those more likely to say they had been given advice, information or help about cutting back included:

- males (10%), compared with females (5%)
- 18 to 24-year-olds (15%), compared with all older age groups
- Pacific (14%), Māori (11%) and Asian (11%) people, compared with European/Other (6%)
- risky drinkers (14%), compared with non-risky drinkers (5%)
- those whose drinking behaviour had changed in the past 12 months (7% of those who had been drinking more and 6% of those who had been drinking less), compared with 2% of those whose drinking had not changed.

When risky drinking behaviour was accounted for, the differences between Māori and European, and 25 to 44-year-olds and 18 to 24-year-olds, were no longer significant.

## About the Attitudes and Behaviour towards Alcohol Survey

- The ABAS is a nationwide telephone survey conducted annually. The survey focuses on behaviour related to the previous month and last drinking occasion, and a range of attitudes/opinions towards alcohol. The 2014/15 ABAS consisted of a sample of 4,005 New Zealanders aged 15-years and over. The survey was conducted between November 2014 and February 2015.
- The main sample, with a response rate of 21%, included 610 Māori, 215 Pacific people, 316 Asian people and 2,864 people of European or other ethnicities (prioritised ethnicity).
- The data have been adjusted (weighted) to ensure they are representative of the New Zealand population.
- For this analysis, proportions and 95% confidence intervals were produced. Odds ratios were used to compare responses between groups. The significance level used for statistical analyses was set to  $\alpha=0.05$ .
- Comparison groups for these analyses were as follows:
  - Gender (male compared with female).
  - Ethnicity (comparisons between European/ Other, Māori, Pacific and Asian).
  - Age (comparisons between 18 to 24, 25 to 44, 45 to 64, 65+ years).
  - Risky drinking (non-risky drinkers compared with risky drinkers in past month).
- A full description of the 2014/15 ABAS survey methodology and further ABAS publications can be found online at <http://www.hpa.org.nz/research-library/research-publications>.

## References

- Ministry of Health (2014). *Annual Update of Key Results 2013/14: New Zealand Health Survey*. Wellington: Ministry of Health.
- Ministry of Health (2015). *Alcohol use 2012/13: Findings from the New Zealand Health Survey*. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

## Citation

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## Key points

- Four in ten adults who were asked about their recent drinking said they had considered cutting back during the previous year. However, fewer than one in ten had either sought or been given information, advice or help with cutting back.
- People who reported risky drinking behaviour and people who had recently changed their drinking behaviour (either drinking more or drinking less) were more likely to have thought about cutting back on drinking or getting information or advice about doing so. These findings may show that thinking about cutting back led to some people now drinking less than they had a year ago, while drinking more may have led some people to think about cutting back. However due to the timeframe of the questions (in the past 12 months), it is not possible to show causality.
- Younger adults and males were more likely to have considered cutting back. However, these differences, along with some ethnic differences, were confounded by higher rates of risky drinking among those groups.
- Younger adults aged between 18 and 24 years were more likely to have made changes to their drinking behaviour (either drinking more or less) in the previous year, compared with all older adults.

## About the HPA

HPA is a Crown entity that leads and delivers innovative, high quality and cost-effective programmes and activities that promote health, wellbeing and healthy lifestyles, prevent disease, illness and injury. HPA enables environments that support health and wellbeing and healthy lifestyles, and reduce personal, social and economic harm. HPA also undertakes functions specific to providing advice and research on alcohol issues.

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