

Raising a glass to the holidays

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Asking people about what they drink on holidays and other special occasions shows we drink around the equivalent of 12 million more bottles of wine a week than we previously thought in England. Previous surveys on alcohol consumption have not accounted for all the alcohol that is sold. Research, funded by Alcohol Research UK and published in the open access journal *BMC Medicine*, appears to have found many of these 'missing units'.

Drinking alcohol is related to 200 different health conditions and was responsible for 3.3 million deaths worldwide in 2012. In many countries, including England, the impact of alcohol on [public health](#) is usually tracked by surveys of average [consumption](#). These data are sometimes not reflected in sales figures, such as in England where survey data

accounts for only about 60% of alcohol sales.

Lead author on the study, Mark Bellis from Liverpool John Moores University and Bangor University, said: "In England, there is a huge difference between what surveys report is consumed and how much alcohol is sold. Every week, the equivalent of over three quarters of a bottle of wine per drinker goes unaccounted for. The problem is that surveys usually ask about typical [drinking](#). This means summer holidays, bank holidays, weddings and many other special occasions when consumption often increases are left out. 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. For many people though these sessions add substantial amounts of alcohol to their annual consumption and inevitably increase their risks of developing alcohol related ill health."

Researchers from Liverpool John Moores University set out to investigate patterns of drinking and how it differs during holidays and special occasions. It is hoped that by creating a more accurate picture of data missing from surveys there could be a better understanding of the health consequences.

A telephone interview was conducted with 6,085 randomly selected people in England. These interviews identified 4,604 current drinkers. Participants were asked about their typical drinking patterns and those outside of typical circumstances such as holidays or special occasions.

Categories of drinkers were based on age groups and level of typical consumption, and most saw an increase of consumption during holidays or special occasions. The largest increase of alcohol intake was seen in those aged 25-34 years old who had the highest level of typical consumption. This category of drinker added an average of 18 units (144 g) of additional alcohol per week due to special occasion drinking.

This study is limited by the fact it is based on self-reported data. To understand how these unaccounted data on non-typical consumption impact public health further studies need to build on this proof of concept study. A larger nationally representative study would test if this method of surveying can be used routinely to more accurately measure drinking patterns.

James Nicholls from Alcohol Research UK, said: "Patterns of consumption have a significant influence on the health impacts of [alcohol](#). For instance, it is widely recognized that any protective effects of moderate drinking on the heart are cancelled out by heavy drinking episodes.

"By looking just at average levels of consumption, we only get a very rough impression of drinking behaviors and any associated risks. If we can better quantify where peaks in consumption occur, among which groups of drinkers, and at what scale, we will be much better placed to target interventions aimed at reducing harm."

More information: Holidays, celebrations and commiserations: measuring drinking during feasting and fasting to improve national and individual estimates of alcohol consumption

Mark A Bellis, Karen Hughes, Lisa Jones, Michela Morleo, James Nicholls, Ellie McCoy, Jane Webster and Harry Sumnall , *BMC Medicine* 2015 . 10.1186/s12916-015-0337-0

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