

UK drinking guidelines are a poor fit with Britain's heavy drinking habits

The UK government's current alcohol guidelines are unrealistic and largely ignored because they have little relevance to people's drinking habits, according to a new report by the Sheffield Alcohol Research Group (SARG) in collaboration with the University of Stirling.

The study, the first of its kind, explored how drinkers make sense of the current UK drinking guidelines which suggest men should not regularly exceed 3-4 units of alcohol per day, and women, 2-3 units daily.

Leading researchers from the UK Centre for Tobacco and Alcohol Studies conducted focus groups to see how the current guidelines were perceived by people aged between 19-65 years and from varied socioeconomic backgrounds.

The findings, published online today by the journal *Addiction*, show that the guidelines are generally disregarded as the daily intake suggestions are deemed irrelevant in a country where most people don't drink every day but may drink heavily at the weekend. Presenting the guidelines in units was also seen as unhelpful as the majority of people measure their intake in the number of drinks or containers such as bottles, glasses or pints they consume.

The study also revealed that people think the recommended quantities of drink are unrealistic, as they don't recognise that many people are motivated to drink to get drunk. Participants preferred the current Australian and Canadian guidelines, which include separate advice for regular drinking and for single occasion drinking, which was regarded as more relevant for occasional drinkers.

While participants did regulate their drinking, this was usually down to practical issues such as needing to go to work or having childcare responsibilities, rather than health concerns or due to guidance.

Melanie Lovatt from the University of Sheffield, who led the study, said "These findings not only help to explain why some drinkers disregard current guidelines, but also show that people make decisions about their drinking by considering their responsibilities and lifestyle, rather than just their health".

Professor Linda Bauld from the University of Stirling said: "This research was conducted in both Scotland and England illustrating that the findings have relevance for different parts of the country. Both policy makers and health professionals may find the results useful in considering how people interpret current guidelines and any place these guidelines may have in providing information to advise people about alcohol consumption."

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For editors:

Lovatt M, Eadie D, Meier PS, Li J, Bauld L, Hastings G and Holmes J. (2015) Lay epidemiology and the interpretation of low risk drinking guidelines by adults in the United Kingdom. *Addiction* 110: [doi: 10.1111/add.13072](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13072)