

Research report

YouGov / Portman Group survey on alcohol  
consumption during the COVID-19 lockdown

June 2020



## Overview

- The Portman Group commissioned YouGov to conduct the first UK-wide survey to measure how much consumers are drinking since the imposition of lockdown measures on 23 March 2020 by the UK Government in response to the outbreak of COVID-19.
- As the new regulations shuttered pubs, bars and restaurants across the UK, numerous media articles appeared highlighting rising retail sales of alcohol, as Britons stocked up in order to comply with Government guidance to stay at home. In this context the Portman Group sought to understand how exactly lockdown has impacted Britons' alcohol consumption while at home. Uniquely, we have commissioned the only study to review weekly unit intake prior to and since COVID-19.
- YouGov surveyed 2070 adults from across the UK online between 22 May and 26 May 2020. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+). All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc.

### The survey found:

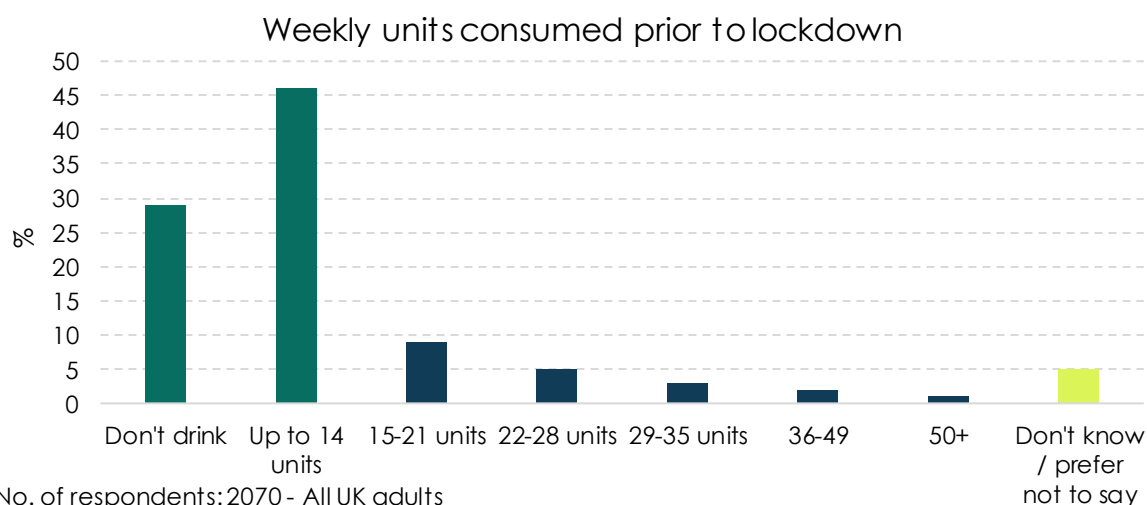
- Overall, the majority of Brits are drinking the same or less compared to before lockdown, with a large majority remaining within the UK Chief Medical Officers' 14 units a week low risk drinking guidelines. Even among those drinking more, close to half remain within these guidelines.
- Prior to lockdown, 75% of UK adults said they either did not drink or drank within the CMO's guidelines of 14 units per week. This equates to 6 pints of 4% ABV beer or 6 glasses of 13% ABV wine a week.
- When asked if their drinking had increased or decreased since lockdown, two thirds (65%) of Brits who drank alcohol before the lockdown said that they are drinking the same, less or had stopped drinking altogether.
- Of the 35% of drinkers who say that they are drinking more, four-fifths (28%) say a little more and 7% say a lot more.
- However, the majority of drinkers remain within 14 units: 81% of those drinking less and 72% of those drinking thereabouts the same since lockdown are within the low risk guidelines. Of those drinking more, 44% are drinking within the CMO guidelines.
- When those who are drinking less since lockdown are asked about how they are moderating their intake of alcohol, 18% say they are intentionally limiting their purchase of alcohol in shops and 10% are incorporating alcohol-free days into their week. Participants also cited the closure of pubs and bars and subsequent lack of socialising as another reason for drinking less.
- This research builds on a number of surveys since March from YouGov, CGA, Alcohol Change UK, IARD and Drinkaware which consistently show that there does not appear to have been a spike in alcohol consumption under lockdown.
- The emerging consensus out of six surveys published since lockdown suggests that around 4 in 5 Brits are drinking the same, less or have stopped altogether, with around a third decreasing consumption and 1 in 5 Brits increasing consumption.

## Survey Results

### 1. Pre-lockdown alcohol consumption – the vast majority of the UK adults are responsible drinkers

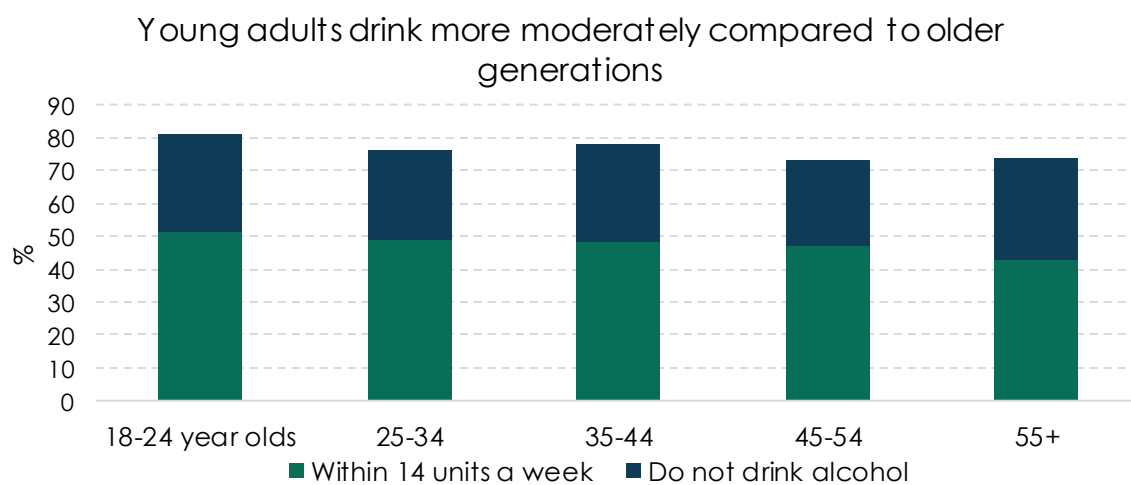
Prior to the imposition of lockdown, 75% of UK adults said they either did not drink or were drinking within the CMO's guidelines of 14 units per week. This equates to 6 pints of 4% ABV beer or 6 glasses of 13% ABV wine a week.

Significantly, just 3% of the British adult population admit to drinking more than 35 units in an average week (5% of respondents either said that they did not know or would prefer not to say). Higher risk levels are defined by the NHS as more than 35 units for women and 50 units for



No. of respondents: 2070 - All UK adults  
YouGov, 22-26 May 2020  
men per week.<sup>1</sup>

Our results highlight that younger adults drink more sensibly compared to older drinkers, with 81% of 18-24 year olds saying that they either did not drink or drank within the CMO guidelines pre-lockdown.



No. of respondents: 2070 - All UK adults  
YouGov, 22-26 May 2020

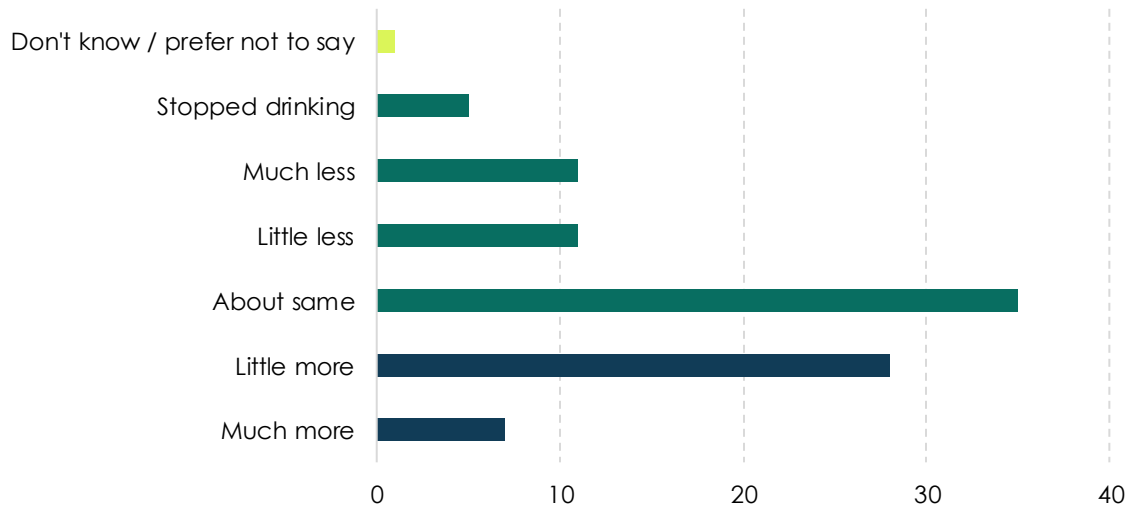
<sup>1</sup> [NHS Digital: Statistics on alcohol](#), February 2020

## 2. Alcohol consumption since lockdown – the majority of the British public drink the same or less compared to before

Since lockdown on 23 March, our survey suggests that two thirds (65%) of Brits who drank alcohol before the lockdown say they are drinking the same, less or stopped drinking altogether (38%, 22% and 5% respectively).

Of the 35% of drinkers who say that they are drinking more, 28% say a little more and 7% say a lot more.

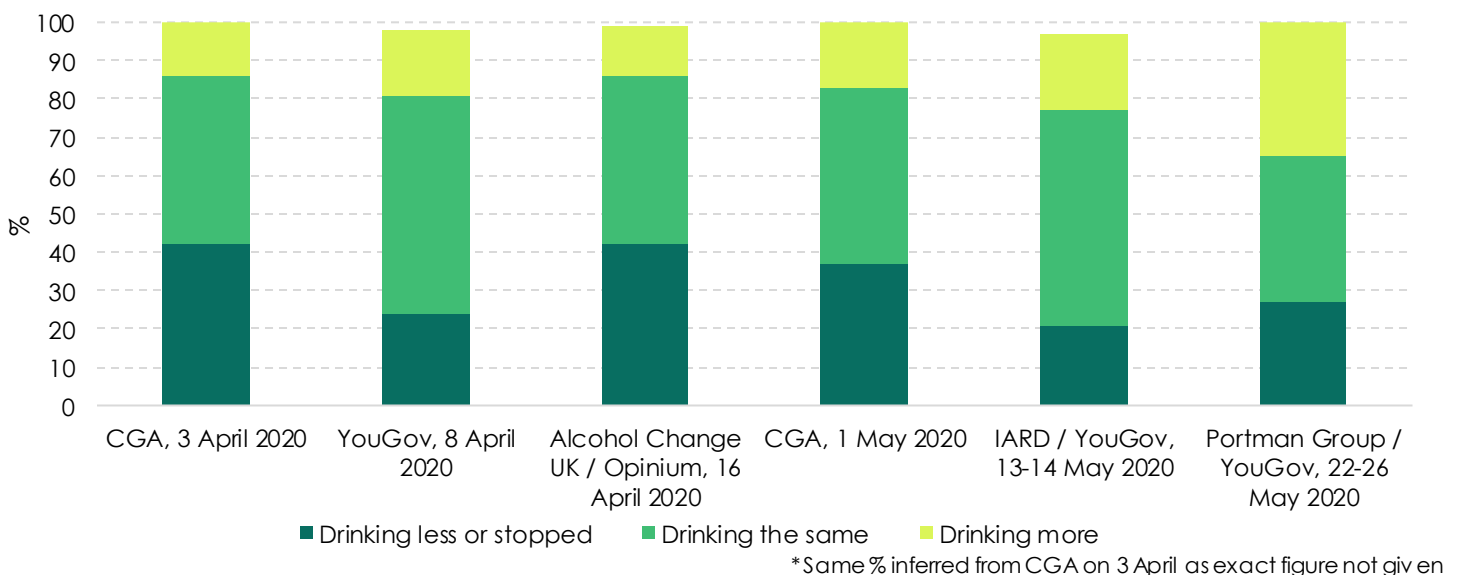
### Change in drinking since lockdown



No. of respondents: 1429 - Who drank alcohol before lockdown  
YouGov, 22-26 May 2020

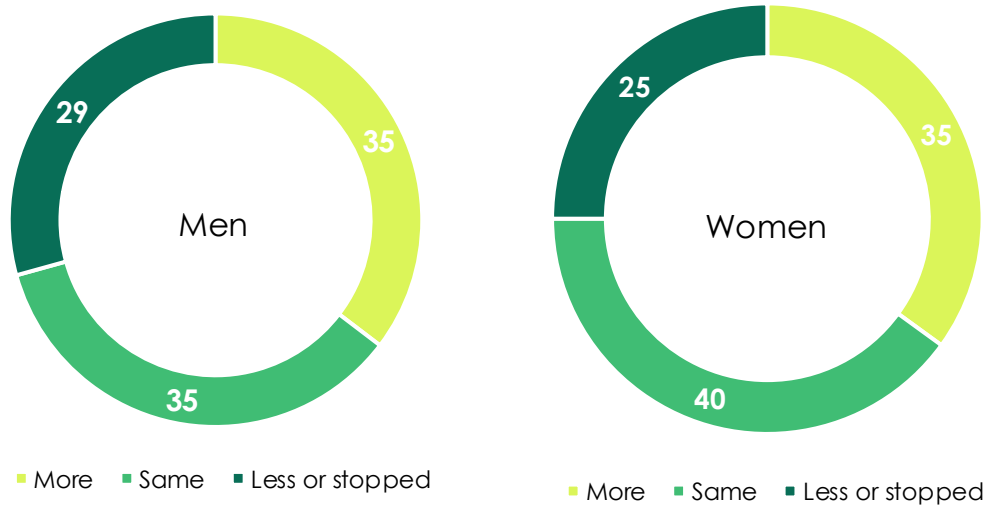
This research builds on a number of surveys since March from YouGov, CGA, Alcohol Change UK, Drinkaware and the Institute for Employment Studies which consistently show that there has not been a spike in alcohol consumption under lockdown amongst the general population.

### A range of polls show that around four in five British drinkers are drinking the same or less since lockdown



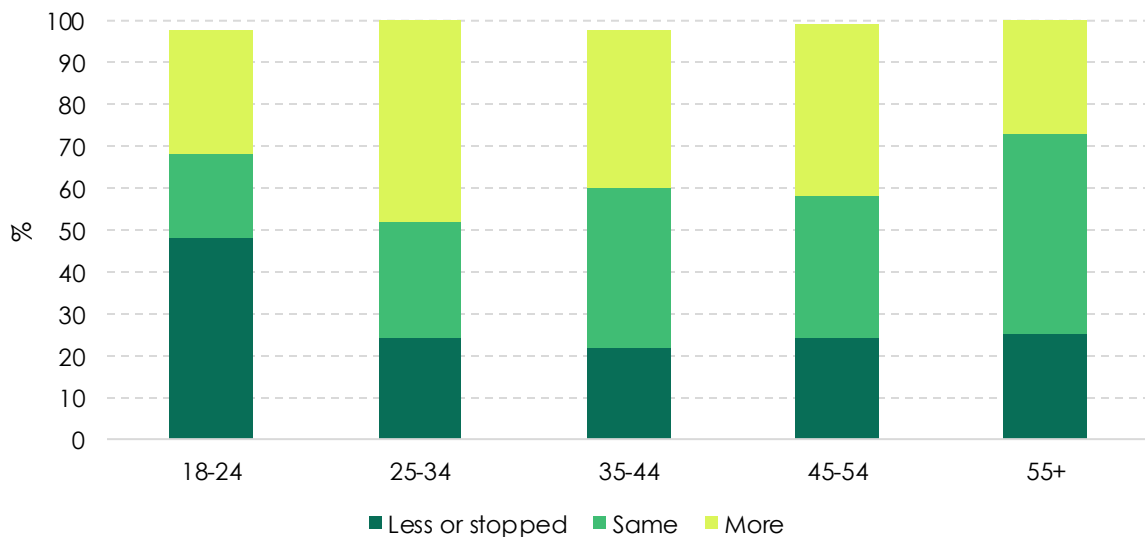
Looking across all the cited polls, the emerging consensus is that around four in five Britons are drinking the same or less since the imposition of lockdown – with around a third drinking less and around a fifth drinking more.

The results also show that both men and women are as likely to drink more, but that men are slightly more likely to have cut their alcohol consumption compared to women.



Furthermore, young adults (those in the 18-24 age range) appear to be the most motivated to cut their alcohol consumption or to stop drinking altogether (37% and 11% respectively), whilst the age group immediately above them – in the 25-34 range – are most likely to have increased their drinking.

Young adult drinkers are more likely to have cut alcohol consumption or stopped drinking



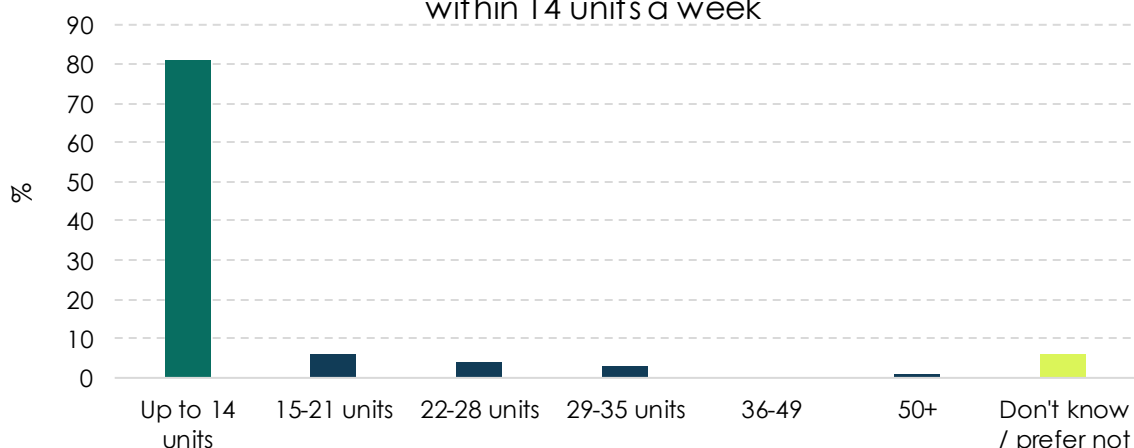
### 3. Alcohol consumption since lockdown – the majority of drinkers remain within Government guidelines

The survey results show that, as before lockdown, the majority of UK drinkers remain within the 14 unit per week low risk guidelines. Those drinking the same or less are much more likely to remain within the limits than those drinking more – although almost half (44%) of those increasing their intake remain within the guidelines.

81% of those who are drinking less since lockdown are drinking within the Government guidelines, building upon previous research which suggests that decreases are being driven by those already drinking within 14 units a week.<sup>2</sup>

However, the survey also highlights the moderation efforts of the remaining 13% who are drinking above Government guidelines. 6% are drinking between 15 and 21 units; 4% between 22 and 28 units; 2% between 29 and 35 units; and 1% more than 50 units a week.<sup>3</sup>

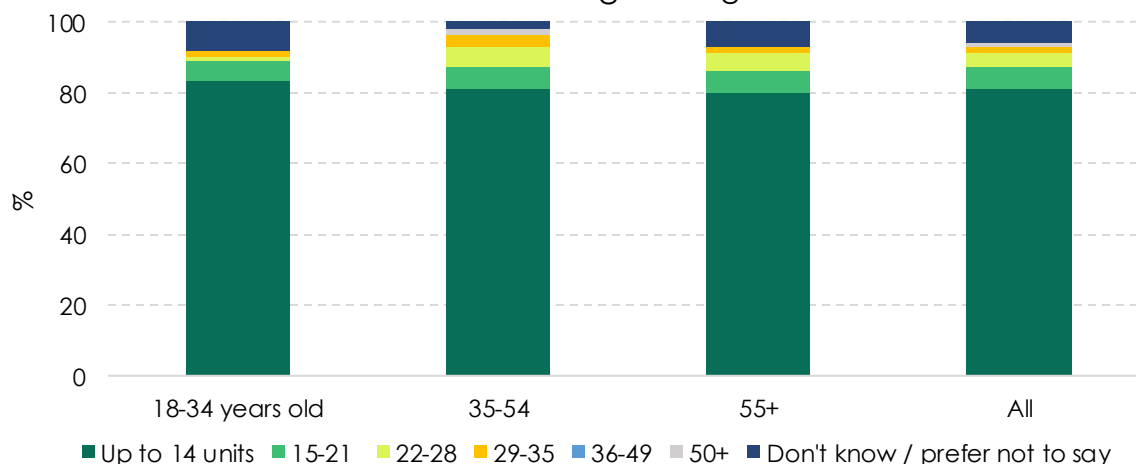
Those drinking less are overwhelmingly drinking within 14 units a week



No. of respondents: 310 - Who have consumed less alcohol since lockdown  
YouGov, 22-26 May 2020

Whilst moderate drinking is present across all age ranges, those drinking less and within 14 units tend to be women, within the 35-44 age bracket, and unemployed/out of work.

Drinking less - age



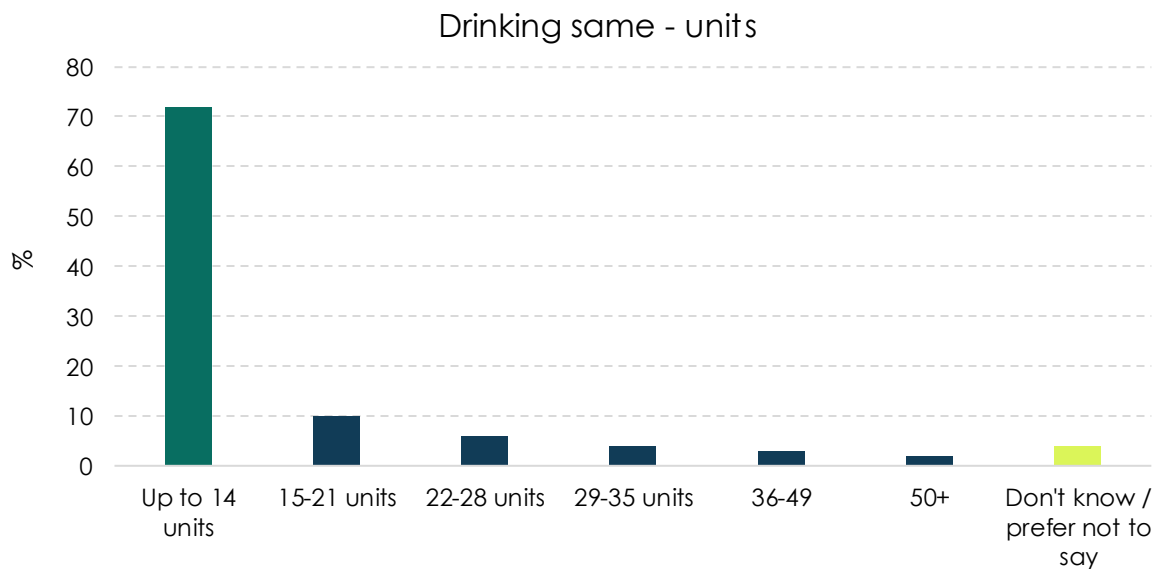
<sup>2</sup> [Alcohol Change UK 'Drinking during lockdown'](#), April 2020

<sup>3</sup> Higher risk levels are defined by the NHS as more than 35 units for women and 50 units for men per week.

## Alcohol consumption since lockdown – the majority of those unchanged drink moderately

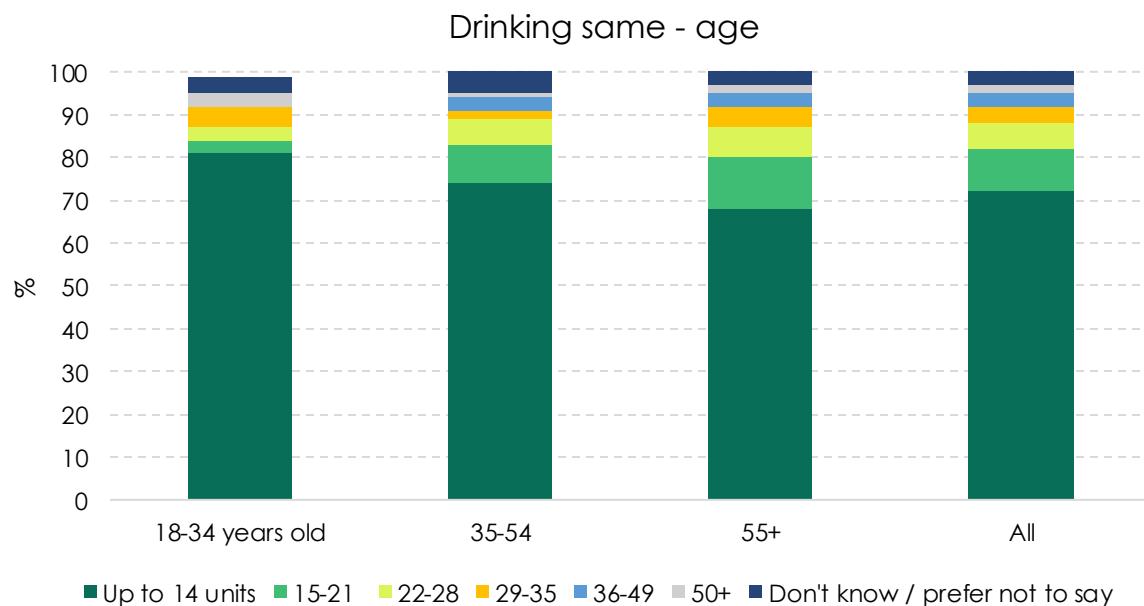
Among those drinking thereabouts the same amount of alcohol compared to before lockdown, almost three quarters (72%) are drinking within 14 units a week.

A further 10% are drinking just over the guidelines up to 21 units a week; 6% are consuming between 22 – 28 units a week; 4% are consuming 29 – 35 units; 3% are consuming 36 – 49 units; and a final 2% are consuming more than 50 units a week.

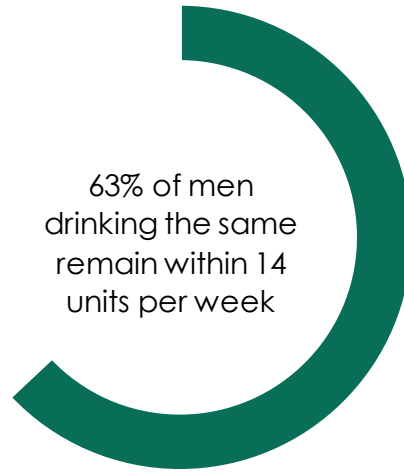
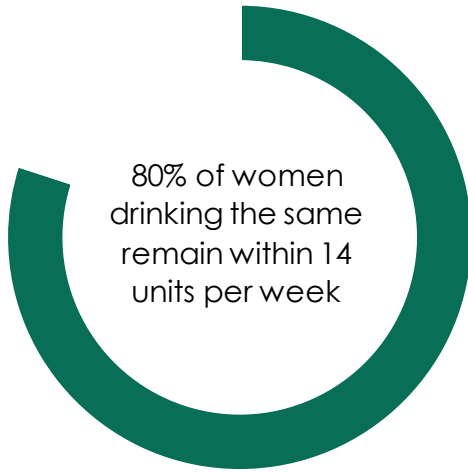


No. of respondents: 536 - Who have consumed the same amount of alcohol since lockdown  
YouGov, 22-26 May 2020

The majority of respondents across all age ranges who are drinking the same as before lockdown are drinking moderately. Younger drinkers (18-34 years old) drinking the same are the most likely to remain within 14 units a week, whilst older drinkers (55+) drinking at the same rates are more likely to be drinking at the higher and more harmful levels.



As before lockdown, women are more likely to remain within the Government guidelines, with four fifths remaining within 14 units per week compared to nearly two thirds of men.

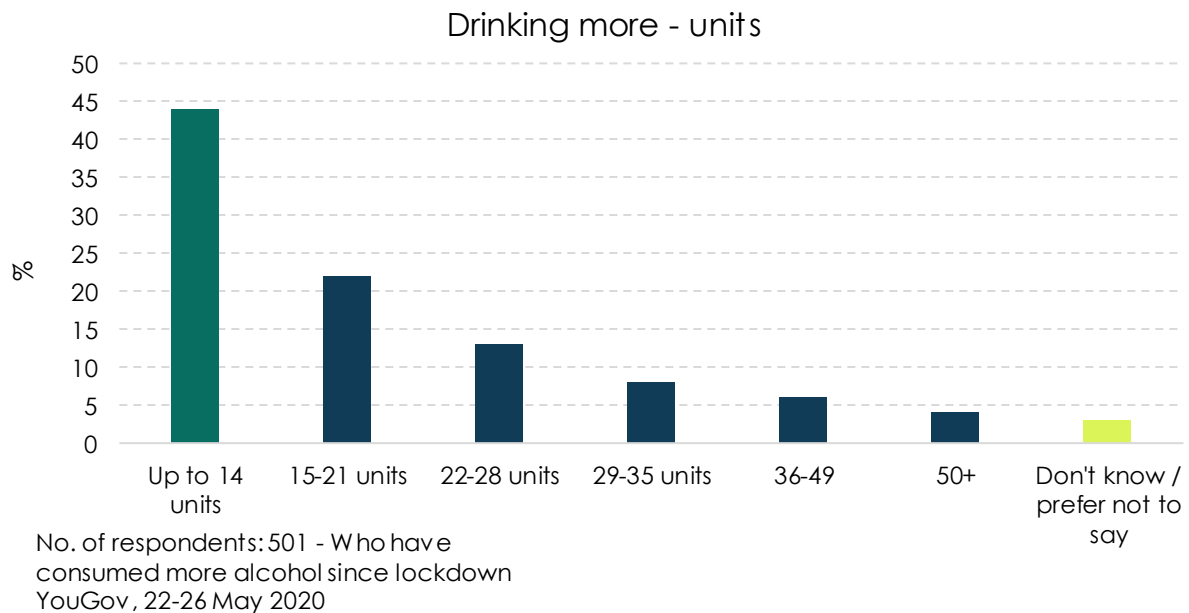




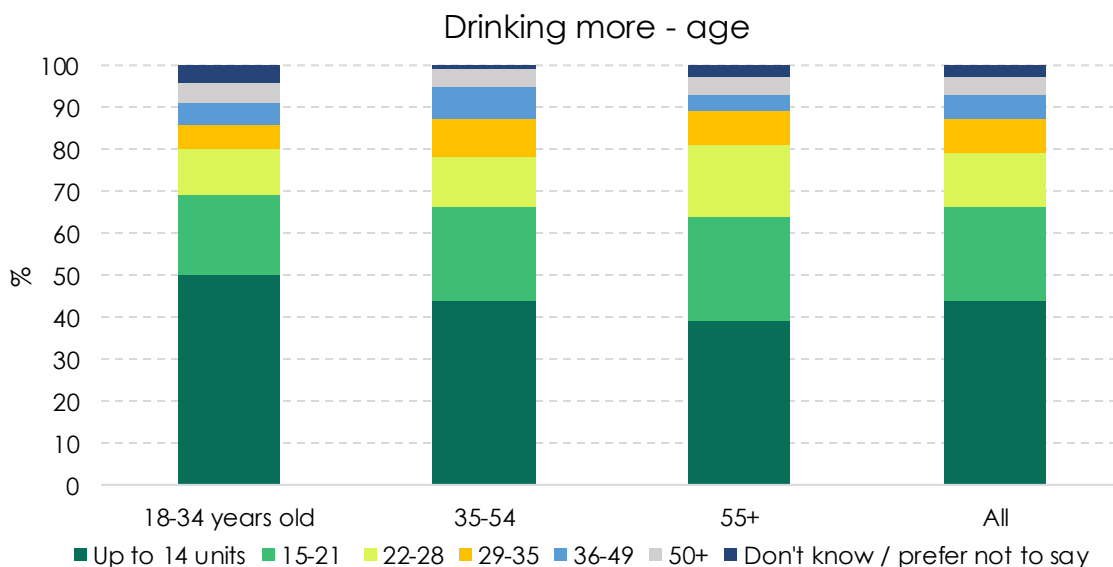
## Alcohol consumption since lockdown – who is drinking more?

The survey findings suggest that nearly half (44%) of those drinking more since lockdown are drinking within the low risk CMO guidelines. A further 22% are drinking just over the guidelines up to 21 units a week, and subsequently 13% are consuming between 22 – 28 units a week; 8% are consuming 29 – 35 units; 6% are consuming 36 – 49 units; and a final 4% are consuming more than 50 units a week.<sup>4</sup>

These findings complement research which suggests that increases in consumption are being driven by those who were already drinking at higher and more harmful rates.<sup>5</sup>



Those respondents who increased their drinking since lockdown and are above 14 units a week tend to be male, older drinkers, and those who are unemployed or retired.

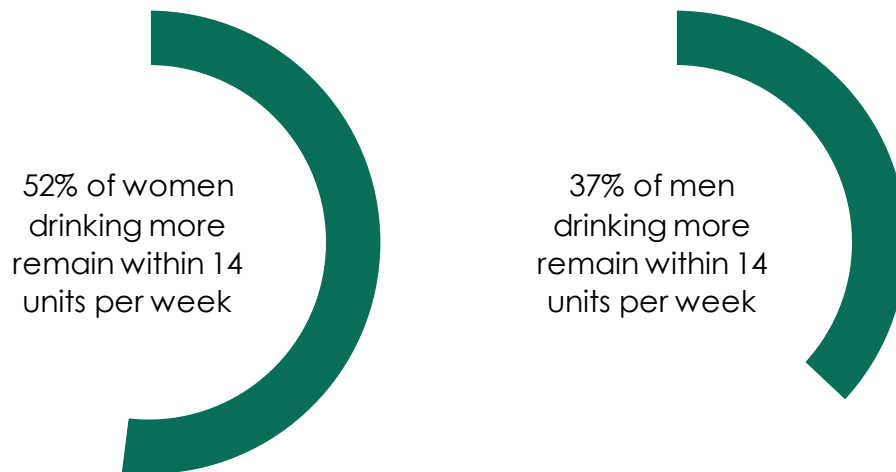


<sup>4</sup> Higher risk levels are defined by the NHS as more than 35 units for women and 50 units for men per week.

<sup>5</sup> [Alcohol Change UK 'Drinking during lockdown'](#), April 2020

Younger drinkers (defined here in the 18-34 age range) are the most likely to have increased their drinking whilst remaining within 14 units a week, and whilst older drinkers (55+) are the most likely to have increased their drinking above 14 units, it is middle-aged drinkers (35-54) who have increased their drinking at the highest and most harmful rates.

There is also a gender divide, with just over half of women drinking more remaining within 14 units, compared to just over a third of men, although a higher number of women were already drinking within 14 units before lockdown compared to men.



#### 4. Brits are utilising a number of different methods to help moderate their drinking

When those who are drinking less are asked about how they are moderating their intake of alcohol, 18% of those drinking less since lockdown say they are intentionally limiting their purchase of alcohol in shops and 10% are incorporating alcohol-free days into their week.

Given the 'other' option, a significant number of participants cited the closure of pubs and bars and subsequent lack of socialising as another key reason for drinking less.



No. of respondents: 310 - Who have consumed less alcohol since lockdown  
YouGov, 22-26 May 2020

The survey also threw up some interesting differences in moderating strategies between men and women.

Women are more likely to switch to lower strength ABV drinks (4%F vs 1%M), adopt drink-free days (12%F vs 8%M) and to join friends for drinks virtually without alcohol (7%F vs 2%M). Whereas men were more likely to limit their purchase of alcohol at shops (19M vs 16%F).

## 5. How do these results fit in to the wider picture of lockdown drinking?

There have been a series of different surveys charting alcohol usage during lockdown, which suggests that the majority are drinking the same or less than before and drinking moderately within the CMO's low-risk guidelines.

Around **4 in 5** Brits are drinking the same or less compared to before lockdown

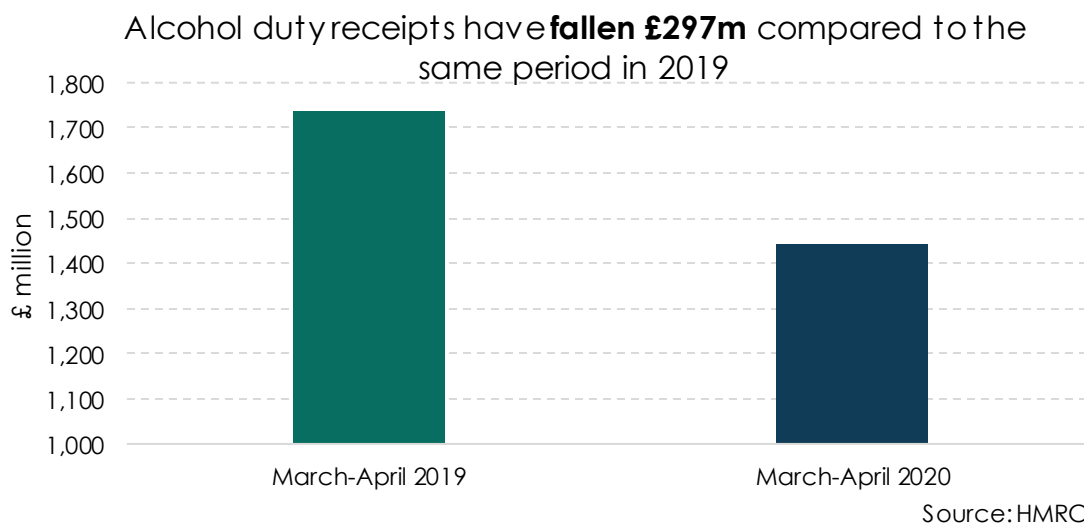


Around a **third** are reducing how much they drink

Source: Alcohol Change UK, CGA, IARD, Portman Group, YouGov

This is in contrast to media-fuelled fears that rising retail sales in supermarkets and off-licenses meant that Brits were turning to drink during lockdown. Alcohol sales in supermarkets and shops did increase dramatically upon lockdown, with the ONS showing a 31.4% increase in alcohol volume sales in March 2020, as the UK entered lockdown.<sup>6</sup> However, this reflected a shift in demand away from pubs and bars to drinking in the home, as Brits stocked up, shopping for more but less frequently in order to comply with Government guidance and stay at home as much as possible.

The emerging picture now is that these increased retail sales were more than offset by a collapse in sales in pubs, bars, clubs and restaurants - all shuttered by the lockdown - with overall sales down. Alcohol duty receipts published by HMRC show a fall in receipts from £1,739 million in March-April 2019 to £1,442 million in March-April 2020.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> [ONS – Retail sales, Great Britain – March 2020](#), April 2020

<sup>7</sup> [HMRC – Alcohol Bulletin](#), May 2020

Collective surveys show that the majority of drinkers are drinking the same or less compared to before lockdown – with figures ranging from two-thirds to four-fifths of drinkers - whilst a minority of drinkers are drinking more – ranging from a third to a fifth of drinkers.

Our survey provides further insight by showing that the majority of drinkers continue to drink moderately within Government guidelines, including around half of those drinking more – showing that not all increases in consumption are cause for alarm.

The survey also backs up previous data suggesting that decreases in consumption are being driven by those who were already drinking less and increases in consumption are being driven by those who were already drinking at higher and more harmful rates.

We believe that our shared efforts need to focus on tackling hazardous drinking and those struggling with alcohol dependence or those on the brink of dependence. As the public health community has shown, this has been exacerbated by the pandemic cutting off social and professional support as well as further economic pressures. Excessive alcohol consumption is dangerous and its effects should not be downplayed.

People drinking at hazardous levels need professional support to overcome what are often multi-faceted challenges. We would encourage all those concerned about their drinking, or about the drinking of someone around them, to seek help from a health professional or visit [Drinkaware.co.uk](http://Drinkaware.co.uk) for free support and practical advice.

However, this has not been the experience of most people in lockdown, and, as the UK looks to reopen the hospitality industry, there is reason to be cautiously optimistic that moderate drinking patterns will continue. Polling from the International Alliance for Responsible Drinking suggests that half (50%) of Brits continue to maintain their new drinking habits, with 35% expecting to return to pre-lockdown habits.

This survey reinforces the pattern of evidence from other research suggesting that the UK was, on the whole, a nation of responsible drinkers before the outbreak of COVID-19, and largely continues to be a nation of responsible drinkers.

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