

## Use and abuse of alcohol in Italy

Year 2009

Istat presents data on alcohol consumption in Italy among the population aged 11 and over focusing on certain risk behaviours. The data were collected through the Multi-purpose survey “Aspects of daily life”.

The sample comprises about 19,000 households amounting to a total of about 49,000 individuals. The interviews were conducted in March 2009.

Notes on the methodology, sampling strategy and accuracy of results are available in Italian at the following address: [http://www.istat.it/salastampa/comunicati/non\\_calendario/20100422\\_00/](http://www.istat.it/salastampa/comunicati/non_calendario/20100422_00/)

### 1. Use of alcohol and emerging alcohol-consumption habits

While alcohol consumption has remained basically stable over the last 10 years, the traditional consumption pattern based on the custom of drinking wine daily during meals is progressively changing.

If we consider individuals aged 14 and over<sup>1</sup>, between 1999 and 2009 the number of consumers of alcoholic beverages has remained stable (around 70%). However, behaviours have become established that more closely resemble a North European type pattern of alcohol consumption outside meals. The number of daily consumers of alcohol has in fact dropped, while there has been an increase in the number of occasional alcohol consumers and those who drink outside meals. The variation over the period in question is most evident among young people and adults up to 44 years of age and increasingly marked among girls and young women. Of particular note is the strong growth in alcohol consumption outside meals among adolescents. Considering young people aged 14-17, between 1999 and 2009 this form of alcohol consumption increased more among females (from 12.8% to 17.4%) but remains more common among males, rising from 18% to 20.4%. The change in habits also concerns the type of beverages consumed: while consumers of wine and beer alone have dropped in number, those who also consume other alcoholic beverages such as aperitifs, digestive liqueurs and spirits have increased. This trend particularly concerns young people under 24 and, to a lesser extent, adults up to the age of 44 without significant differences between the sexes. Consistent with the trend observed over the last 10 years, not only has alcohol consumption outside meals increased among the young but, since 2003, the proportion of individuals who engage in *binge drinking* has become stable.

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<sup>1</sup> For the period 1998-2002 information was gathered only for people aged 14 and over, whereas from 2003 it also includes persons aged 11-13.

## 2. Alcohol abuse and risk behaviours

In 2009, people aged 11 and over with at least one risk behaviour (non-moderate daily consumption or *binge drinking*) were 8,454,000 (15.8%), comprising 6,434,000 males (25%) and 2,020,000 females (7.3%). Non-moderate daily consumption concerns 14.8% of males and 3.8% of females. *Binge drinking* concerns 12.4% of males and 3.1% of females.

Risk behaviours are most common among the following age groups: the elderly aged 65 and over (44.7% of males and 11.3% of females) amount to 3,017,000 individuals; 18-24 year-olds (22.6% of males and 8.4% of females), to 651,000; minors aged 11-17 years (17.8% of males and 12.3% of females), to 613,000.

The consumption pattern among the elderly is essentially traditional, i.e. characterised by drinking wine during meals. Consequently, the prevalent type of risk behaviour in this population group is almost entirely linked to non-moderate daily consumption (43.5% of males and 10.6% of females).

Risk behaviours among young people aged 18-24 present very different characteristics to those in the adult and the elderly population. In particular, the consumption pattern among young people features a high incidence of *binge drinking* (21.6% of males and 7.9% of females), which constitutes practically the entire overall risk.

The WHO recommends total abstinence from alcohol consumption before the age of 15. In this respect, consumption of even one alcoholic beverage per year by minors aged 11-15 years is considered a risk behaviour. According to this criterion, a significant proportion of the population is at risk, with little difference between the sexes: 18.5% of males and 15.5% of females. Risk behaviours are also relatively high among 16 and 17-year-olds, with 16.3% of males and 4.5% of females indulging in at least one type. Moreover, even at this age *binge drinking* reaches levels similar to those of the average population, respectively 11.8% for males and 4% for females. Further, non-moderate alcohol consumption by parents appears to affect the behaviour of their children: 23% of boys aged 11-17 living in households where at least one parent adopts alcohol-related risk behaviour are at risk, while the percentage drops to 14.7% among young people living with parents who do not indulge in these habits.

As regards geographical area, alcohol abuse is more prevalent among the population of Northern Italy. In particular, the proportion of the resident population at risk in the North-East (29.6% of males and 9.8% of females) and North-West (26.9% of males and 8.2% of females) is above average. In the Islands, however, the percentage drops considerably (20.5% of males and 4.6% of females). Risk behaviours are more common in small municipalities of up to 2,000 inhabitants (34.3% of males and 7.5% of females) and decrease as the size of the population of the municipality of residence increases.

17.8% of regular drivers (people aged 18 and over who drive at least several times a week) engage in alcohol-related risk behaviour while this percentage is 12.2% among occasional drivers and non-drivers. In particular, among young people aged 18-24 regular drivers present a higher percentage of alcohol-related risk behaviour than occasional drivers and non-drivers. In this age group, 24.6% of male regular drivers engage in at least one risk behaviour compared to 17.9% of occasional drivers and non-drivers.

Among individuals who regularly go to discotheques (more than 12 times a year) the proportion of those who declare an alcohol risk behaviour is higher: 35.1% of males (compared to 23.8% of non-discotheque-goers) and, respectively, 14.5% and 6.2% of females. Taking into consideration the incidence of drunkenness alone, this concerns 29.1% of males who go to a discotheque more than once a month (compared to 8.9% of non-discotheque-goers) and, respectively 11.4% and

1.8% of females. This phenomenon mainly concerns young people up to 24 years of age and adults up to 44.

A close correlation emerges among regular drivers, especially in the 18-24 age group, between how often they frequent discotheques and alcohol-related risk behaviour. In fact, among male regular drivers aged 18-24 the proportion of consumers at risk rises from 13.3% for non-discotheque-goers to 39.2% in the case of those who go to a discotheque more than once a month. Similarly, among young female regular drivers these figures increase respectively from 3.9% to 16.7%.

## Glossary

### **Alcohol consumption:**

consumption of at least one type of alcoholic beverage (wine, beer, other drinks) at least once a year.

### **Daily alcohol consumption:**

consumption of at least one type of alcoholic beverage (wine, beer, other drinks) on a daily basis.

### **Occasional alcohol consumption:**

consumption of at least one type of alcoholic beverage (wine, beer, other drinks) on an occasional basis (less than once a day).

### **Outside meal alcohol**

**consumption:** consumption of at least one type of alcoholic beverage (wine, beer, other drinks) at least once a year outside meals.

### **Alcohol units:**

one alcohol unit corresponds to the quantity of alcohol contained in a small glass (125 ml) of medium-strength wine, or in a can (330 ml) of medium-strength beer, or in a small glass (40 ml) of spirits.

### **Non-moderate daily alcohol**

**consumption:** consumption in excess of: 2-3 alcohol units a day for adult males; 1-2 alcohol units for adult women; 1 unit for the elderly aged 65 and over; any daily quantity for minors aged 11-17.

**Binge drinking:** consumption of 6 or more glasses of an alcoholic beverage on a single occasion.

### **Alcohol-related health-risk behaviour:**

- consumption in excess of: 2-3 alcohol units a day for adult males; 1-2 alcohol units for adult women; 1 unit for the elderly aged 65 and over; any daily quantity for minors aged 11-17;
- consumption of 6 or more glasses of an alcoholic beverage on a single occasion (binge drinking);
- consumption of at least one alcoholic beverage during the year for minors aged 11-15.