

'Alarming' New Data on US Binge Drinking

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January 10, 2012 — Roughly 1 in 6 (38 million) adults in the United States binge drink approximately 4 times a month, according to a Vital Signs [report](#) published today in the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, a publication of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Binge drinking is defined as consuming 4 or more drinks for women and 5 or more drinks for men on an occasion.

The new data suggest that, on average, the largest number of drinks consumed by binge drinkers is 8 drinks per binge episode, "far exceeding drinking levels that define this behavior," Ursula Bauer, PhD, MPH, director of the CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, said during a telebriefing.

"It is alarming that binge drinkers are consuming so much alcohol with such regularity," Robert Brewer, MD, MPH, Alcohol Program Lead at the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, added in a statement.

The findings stem from data collected as part of the 2010 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), an ongoing state-based telephone health survey of US adults. Nearly 458,000 US adults aged 18 and older were asked about their drinking habits.

According to the CDC, the overall proportion of adults in the US who engaged in binge drinking in 2010 was 17.1%. Twice as many men reporting binge drinking as women (23.2% vs 11.4%).

The CDC notes that the higher overall prevalence of binge drinking in 2010 compared with 2009 (17.1% vs 15.2%) is likely a result of the inclusion in 2010 of cellular telephone respondents in 2010, who are typically younger and male.

Adults most apt to binge drink in 2010 were aged 18 to 24 (28.2%) and aged 25 to 34 years, with these groups drinking 9.3 and 8.4 drinks per binge occasion, respectively.

Although binge drinking is more common among young adults, it is noteworthy that the CDC says that elderly adults (aged 65 and older) who report binge drinking do so more often than their younger counterparts — 5 to 6 times per month on average vs 4 times per month.

Binge drinking increased with household income and was highest among those with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more (20.2%). However, the highest frequency and intensity of binge drinking by household income was reported by those with annual incomes of less than \$25,000 (5 episodes per month and 8 to 9 drinks on occasion).

According to the report, binge drinking among adults is most common in the Midwest, New England, the District of Columbia, Alaska, and Hawaii. However, binge drinkers consume more drinks in the southern part of the Mountain states (Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah), the Midwest, and some states where binge drinking is less common, including Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina.

Binge drinking continues to be a "common and largely unrecognized public health problem," Dr. Bauer said, one that exacts a high toll. It accounts for more than half of the estimated 80,000 average annual deaths and three quarters of \$223.5 billion in economic costs resulting from excessive alcohol consumption in the United States.

"Binge drinking causes a wide range of health, social and economic problems and this report confirms the problem is really widespread," said CDC Director Thomas R. Frieden, MD, MPH.

Dr. Brewer said the CDC is "working in collaboration with our partners to strengthen binge drinking prevention through improved public health surveillance of excessive alcohol use and by supporting the implementation of community-based prevention strategies that can reduce excessive drinking."

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