

using a longer reference period may result in somewhat lower estimates of both quantity and frequency of consumption. Much research has been devoted to alcohol measurement in population-based surveys, and no one “best method” has emerged (18–21). More research is needed.

*Lifetime alcohol drinking status* (table 1) describes the history of alcohol use and includes four mutually exclusive categories: (a) lifetime abstainers—persons who have had fewer than 12 drinks in their entire life; (b) former infrequent drinkers—persons who have had at least 12 drinks in their lifetime, but fewer than 12 drinks in any one year and no drinks in the past year; (c) former regular drinkers—persons who have had at least 12 drinks in their lifetime and at least 12 drinks in a single year but no drinks in the past year; and (d) current drinkers—persons who have had at least 12 drinks in their lifetime and at least one drink in the past year.

*Current drinking status* (table 2) describes alcohol consumption during the past year: (a) nondrinkers—persons who had no drinks in the past year (lifetime abstainers and former drinkers); (b) current infrequent drinkers—persons who have had at least 12 drinks in their lifetime and 1–11 drinks during the past year; (c) light drinkers—persons who have had at least 12 drinks in their lifetime, at least 12 drinks in the past year, and 3 drinks or fewer per week, on average; (d) moderate drinkers—persons who have had at least 12 drinks in their lifetime, at least 12 drinks in the past year, and more than 3 drinks per week up to 14 drinks per week (for men) and more than 3 drinks per week up to 7 drinks per week (for women), on average; (e) heavier drinkers—persons who have had at least 12 drinks in their lifetime, at least 12 drinks in the past year, and had either more than 7 drinks per week (women) or more than 14 drinks per week (men). (See [Technical notes](#) for details.)

Five or more drinks in 1 day (tables 3 and 4) is a measure of heavy drinking, which may or may not be episodic, but it is not a measure of binge drinking. Usually binge drinking

is defined as “five or more drinks at one sitting” or “five or more drinks during a 2-hour period.” The NHIS question asks current drinkers how many days in the past year they consumed five or more alcoholic beverages during an entire day. This question followed, but was entirely separate from, the questions about usual drinking practices. Table 3 shows the percent of *all adults* who had five or more drinks in 1 day at least once, and at least 12 times during the past year, thus showing the prevalence of this behavior in the general adult population. Table 4 shows the percent of *current drinkers* who had five or more drinks in 1 day at least once and at least 12 times during the past year.

Figures 1–6 highlight selected findings from tables 1–4. Together these tables and figures provide a summary of alcohol use among U.S. adults. All estimates and associated standard errors in this report were generated using the SUDAAN software package (22), which is designed to handle the complex sample design used by the NHIS. All estimates were weighted to reflect the U.S. civilian noninstitutionalized population aged 18 years and older.

The summary indicator of alcohol use shown in table 2 has the limitation of masking patterns of alcohol use that can be important for assessing alcohol problems. For example, in data presented in this report, a man who consumed 14 drinks in a single day, once a week, would be in the same category as a man who consumed two drinks per day every day, 7 days a week. Similarly, a woman who consumed seven drinks in 1 day, once a week, would be in the same category as a woman who consumed one drink per day every day.

In addition to the reference period, there was another important conceptual change to measuring alcohol consumption starting in 1997. Previously in the NHIS, current drinking questions were asked only of individuals who had reported that they had ever had 12 drinks in a single year. With increasing recognition of the importance of capturing all types of drinking behavior, current questions related to current alcohol consumption are now

asked of anyone who has had 12 drinks in his or her entire life. As a result of this change, the categories “current infrequent drinker” and “former infrequent drinker” include some people who would have been classified as “lifetime abstainers” using data from earlier years of the NHIS.

Current drinkers, including those for whom the amount consumed was unknown, were asked how often they had five or more drinks in 1 day during the past year. This question is an indicator of days of heavy drinking, which may or may not occur regularly. It should not be considered “binge” drinking, as the term “binge drinking” indicates consumption of large amounts of alcohol at one sitting. The NHIS does not ask about binge drinking.

Most estimates presented in tables 1–4 were age adjusted to the 2000 projected U.S. population aged 18 years and older, using SUDAAN’s PROC DESCRIPT procedure (22–24).

Age adjustment was used to allow comparison among various sociodemographic subgroups that have different age structures. For the population totals as well as for many of the sociodemographic subgroups, the age-adjusted and unadjusted estimates were similar. The estimates most affected by age adjusting were education and marital status due to the differences in the age structures of the various education and marital status groups. Tables showing unadjusted estimates by race-ethnicity, education, poverty status, marital status, geographic region, and location of residence, are available on the NCHS Web site (25).

Age-adjusted estimates were compared using two-tailed t-tests at the 0.05 level. No adjustments were made for multiple comparisons. Terms such as “greater than” and “less than” indicate a statistically significant difference. Terms such as “similar” or “no difference” indicate that the statistics being compared were not significantly different. Lack of comment regarding the difference between any two statistics does not necessarily mean that the difference was tested and found to be not significant.

With the exception of information on place of residence (MSA versus