

## AlcoholNZ article

### Title

#### Preloading – The party before the party

### At a glance

- This article was published in print form in HPA's May 2014 *AlcoholNZ* magazine (available on [alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz](http://alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz)).
- It provides a brief overview of literature about the motivations and practices of preloading.
- The term preloading is used to describe the consumption of alcohol in an unregulated setting, like someone's home, a hotel room or on the street, before a night out or drinking occasion.
- People preload for a range of reasons including cost, purchase age restrictions, to achieve intoxication, and to feel part of a group.
- Most preloaders plan to preload and also tend to drink more over the course of a drinking occasion than non-preloaders do.

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# Preloading

## The party before the party

Preloading seems to have become a routine part of a drinking occasion for many who are engaging in the night-time economy (NTE) of pubs, bars and clubs. Studies examining practices in the NTE have found, for example, that nearly two-thirds of those who go into town for a night out have preloaded (see Miller et al., 2013).

So what is it exactly? The term 'preloading' is used to describe the consumption of alcohol in an unregulated setting (like someone's home, in a hotel room or on the street) before a night out or other type of social activity or occasion. It is also known, particularly in the American context, as frontloading, predrinking, pregaming, prepartying and prefunking.

Is it a new phenomenon? No. But the fact that it is becoming more a regular practice across different groups indicates it is a far more typical occurrence in a 'night out' than it perhaps was in the past.

### Motivations and practices

So why preload? When comparing the cost of a bottle of wine in the supermarket with the price of a glass of the same wine at a pub or bar, the reason appears obvious. However, researchers are finding that, while the availability of cheap alcohol at off-licences is a primary motivation for preloading, there are other factors involved. Wells, Graham and Purcell (2009), for example, found that drinkers preload to achieve intoxication and also to meet social goals such as being with friends and for increased confidence for the night ahead (see also Foster, 2012).

Other studies have found that preloading is a part of protracted group preparations (Waitt, Jessop & Gorman-Murray, 2011), to satisfy social motivations that are not on the evening's agenda, such as catching up with intimate friends (Hutton, Wright & Saunders, 2013). For minors (in New Zealand, those under the legal purchase age of 18 years), a preloading event is often the only opportunity to consume alcohol (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007).

There are also age and gender specific practices associated with preloading. Younger adults are more likely to preload than older adults (Measham, Moore & Østergaard, 2011; Miller et al., 2013). Male drinkers are more likely to preload than female drinkers (Miller et al., 2013). Pedersen, LaBrie and Kilmer (2009) found that male drinkers were more

likely to preload with drinking games, before concerts/sporting events, before going to a movie and when by themselves. Female drinkers, on the other hand, were more likely to preload with friends, before going to a bar and while listening to music.

While there is a variety of motivations for – and practices of – preloading, there appears to be a fairly definitive pattern to preloading events. Most preloaders plan to preload (Barton & Husk, 2012; Forsyth, 2010; Hutton et al., 2013; McEwan, Swain & Campbell, 2011). Most preloading occurs in private homes (Miller et al., 2013). Preloaders also tend to drink more over the course of a drinking occasion than non-preloaders. Measham et al.'s (2011) study, for example, found that preloaders consumed approximately eight units (with no gender differences found), prior to 'going out' (see also Wells et al., 2009).

## Implications

These patterns of preloading raise a number of issues that could be considered further. That one of the motivations for preloading is to achieve intoxication, and that preloaders drink more over a typical occasion than non-preloaders do, indicates that 'low risk' drinking advice is not being followed by a significant segment of the drinking population. This may be due, in part, to understandings of 'a drink' being relatively different from amounts used to calculate standard drinks.

Another factor is an absence of natural breaks (like moving between bars) and of soft-end controls (like door-men having a quiet word to slow down) (Barton & Husk, 2012). As Measham et al.'s (2011) study found, many women have surpassed their 'safe' levels before they even enter a bar.

There is some evidence that an intention to have a night 'on the town' can curb the consumption levels at a preloading event. McEwan et al.'s (2011) study of drinking by tertiary students found that the achievement of a predetermined level of intoxication was planned for in consultation with peers and that preloading was integral to meeting this goal. At the same time, levels of intoxication were, however, monitored to ensure entry into on-licensed premises.<sup>1</sup>

However, one of the risks of consuming large amounts of alcohol, as Pedersen et al. (2009) note, is that a person may not experience the full effects of ingested alcohol until reaching the desired destination or occasion. For the preloader, this may mean that intended goals for the evening will be waylaid, or that risks normally associated with the end of a night out need to be dealt with at the start. Wells et al. (2009, p. 6) note that preloaders are "navigating public places and using various modes of transportation with impaired judgement and reduced perception of risk on their way to licenced premises".

For licencees, challenges emerge for the responsible service of alcohol at licenced premises (Hughes, Anderson, Morleo & Bellis, 2007; Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007). Patrons who have preloaded may make it past the doorman (if the full effects of alcohol consumed are not yet apparent), and then not come into contact with bar staff at all (once those effects commence). The Sale and Supply of Alcohol Act 2012 states that it is an offence to sell or supply alcohol to an intoxicated person (Part 2, s 248), but also that it is an offence to allow people to *become* intoxicated on licenced premises (Part 2, s 249) and an offence to allow a person to *be* intoxicated on licenced premises (Part 2, s 252). A study in the Australian context found that many on-licence licencees view it as unfair that they carry the responsibility for intoxicated patrons who have spent their money at off-licences, such as bottle stores and supermarkets (Miller et al., 2012).

An alternative way to address the harm associated with preloading is to entice people back to public spaces where supervision exists. There are some indications that efforts to reduce alcohol-related harms at on-licence premises may have had an unintended consequence of displacing drinking practices to unregulated spaces (such as the home) (Forsyth, 2010; Wells et al., 2009). Wells et al. (2009) argue that moves to expand the social atmosphere of bars toward intimate socialising and away from "high-energy chaotic environments" would address the more social motivations for preloading, as would more affordable prices address the economic incentive.

Ultimately, however, the intent to get drunk needs to be tackled via efforts to promote moderation alongside a range of other multi-level interventions to reduce alcohol-related harm.

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<sup>1</sup> Intoxication levels were also monitored to minimise the impact of alcohol-related harms.

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