

# In a glimpse

FEBRUARY 2025

## Breaking away from alcohol: experiences of users seeking care

---

To better describe treatment strategies for alcohol use disorders, the OFDT conducted a qualitative study (TUPSALCO) between 2022 and 2024 on use trajectories and recourse to alcohol-related care, with a particular focus on comparing the perspectives of professionals and clients.

## Alcohol remains the most widely used drug in France

Alcohol remains the most widely used drug in France, with eight million people using it at least three times a week. Alcohol use disorders accounted for half of all cases managed in specialised addiction medicine and harm reduction facilities, with 595 000 hospital admissions in 2023 for which the primary diagnosis was alcohol-related.

This issue of *Tendances* analysed the accounts of 33 clients recruited from healthcare settings: medical addiction microstructures, inpatient withdrawal units, medical and rehabilitation units (SMR), and day hospitals. They were interviewed retrospectively about their history of use, their experience with the different treatment systems (general practice, specialised care, psychiatry, general hospital), and their perceptions of the support they received.

## Complex care pathways

These qualitative interviews provided valuable insights into clients' experiences and perceptions regarding the involvement of primary care, occupational health services, the medico-social sector, and hospitals in managing dependence, while also highlighting the complexity of care pathways. Preferred doctors and specialised drug treatment centres (CSAPAs) emerged as stable reference points that were clearly identified by clients, and which frequently referred them for withdrawal hospitalisation, along with occupational health physicians and emergency services. Hospitalisation was also perceived as a time of separation from alcohol, which is omnipresent in social life. The interviews nevertheless highlighted the diverse support measures available to help people move away from alcohol, including participation in self-help groups, certain group workshops and, more generally, diversification of activities.

Finally, it highlighted the complexity of personal pathways, challenging the notion of "recovery from addiction" – still commonly regarded as entry into abstinence – a goal promoted by users themselves, but not always sustained. For many of these people, 'recovery' thus appeared to be a process with an uncertain outcome.

---

- People dependent on alcohol and engaged in addiction treatment describe complex trajectories combining care with recurring periods of controlled use, prolonged abstinence, and relapse.
- Alcohol use disorder most often begins during adolescence and intensifies in adulthood, when the main motivations for drinking are reported to be countering boredom, numbing psychological and physical distress, and trying to overcome difficulties at work.
- For many users, the preferred doctor serves as an anchor point who often follows their care pathway for several years. Similarly, specialised drug treatment centres (CSAPAs) serve as clearly identified reference points for clients.
- Hospital admission for withdrawal is seen as a period of physical and psychological rest, and a way of distancing oneself from alcohol. The majority of clients consider withdrawal to be a prerequisite for subsequent addiction treatment carried out in medical and rehabilitation units (SMRs) or in day hospitals, where they report discovering 'toolkits' to help them manage the urge to drink.
- Over the course of their care pathways, people's perceptions of treatment to help them break away from alcohol evolve: certain group workshops, forms of advice, or interpretations offered by professionals, which seemed insignificant upon leaving an SMR or a day hospital, later acquire meaning.