

Alcohol and psychological distress during the Covid-19 pandemic: how did older Australian women fare?

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Introduction and Aims: During the Covid-19 pandemic an increase in alcohol consumption was reported by amongst Australians aged under 65 years. Risk factors include being female, middle-aged and experiencing high stress levels. However, less is known about women 65 years and older. This study compares alcohol consumption and psychological distress levels in older Australian women during the pandemic (2021) to pre-pandemic (2019).

Design and Methods: This study used two waves of the Annual Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey data. Data for females aged 65 years and over ($m=73.92$ years) in 2019 and who had data on the key variables in 2021 were included ($N=1604$).

Key Findings: There were no significant changes in alcohol quantity or frequency from pre-pandemic to intra-pandemic. Women aged 65 to 74 years ($m=3.92$) consumed significantly more than those over 84 years ($m=1.97$) during covid ($p=.008$). Psychological distress increased significantly between 2019 and 2021 ($p<.001$), and was associated with significantly lower frequency of consumption, lower socioeconomic status and not being partnered during Covid.

Discussions and Conclusions: Alcohol consumption during covid did not differ to pre-covid in older Australian women, however their psychological distress increased. Findings highlight the greater risk of psychological distress for older women who are not partnered and have fewer financial, social and health resources. Thus presenting a vulnerable segment of the Australian population. Further research will assess these patterns post-covid.

Implications for Practice or Policy: A rapidly aging population means it is critical to ensure affordable accessible mental health care for older Australian women, particularly in the post-pandemic era.

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