

# Do major sporting events drive alcohol-related harm? A case study of the AFL Grand Final

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**Introduction:** Alcohol is the fifth-largest contributor to disease burden in Australia, with economic costs exceeding \$66 billion annually. Many Australians exceed drinking guidelines, increasing risks for acute illness or injury requiring emergency care. Alcohol-related harms follow predictable temporal patterns, peaking during weekends, public holidays, and major events. The AFL Grand Final attracts more than 100,000 spectators to the Melbourne Cricket Ground and holds a prominent place in Australia's social fabric. Alcohol consumption is embedded in Grand Final traditions, with prior research finding that self-reported intake averages six standard drinks on match day, exceeding NHMRC guidelines. Despite this, the current scale and timing of alcohol-related ambulance demand and resource burden remain unknown.

## Methods:

We analysed 273,699 alcohol related ambulance attendances recorded by the National Ambulance Surveillance System in Victoria from 2012–2023 (excluding 2014). For each year, three Thursday–Sunday periods were defined: Grand Final (GF) Week, preceding finals weeks, and a four-week pre-finals baseline. Daily alcohol-related attendances were modelled using Poisson regression, adjusting for day of week, calendar year, region, and the introduction of the Grand Final Eve public holiday in 2015.

**Results:** GF weekend was associated with a 29% increase in alcohol-related ambulance attendances compared with baseline (IRR 1.29, 95% CI 1.20–1.38). This increase was concentrated on match day: GF Saturday showed a 48% rise relative to comparable Saturdays (IRR 1.48, 95% CI 1.32–1.68), driven mainly by evening hours (18:00–24:00). Alcohol-related harms were not confined to the MCG area, with hotspots identified across metropolitan and regional areas.

## Discussion and Conclusions:

The AFL Grand Final produces a surge in alcohol-related ambulance demand, concentrated on Saturday evening, not during the match itself. These hotspots support targeted ambulance surge planning and public-health messaging that recognises the Grand Final as a statewide cultural drinking occasion extending beyond the stadium to homes and community gatherings.

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