

Reductions in Alcohol Intake Among Young Adults During the Pandemic Underpinned by Binge Drinkers and Not Related to Changes in Behavioural Impulsivity

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Introduction: Despite early concerns regarding increased alcohol intake during the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, findings to date suggest Australians decreased their consumption. Few studies, however, focused on binge drinking among young adults or considered how cognition – particularly related to impulsivity – might have been associated with any change in drinking behaviour. Using a longitudinal design, we charted changes in alcohol intake and behavioural impulsivity among young adults during the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic.

Method: Healthy individuals ($n = 83$, $M_{age} = 20.06$) completed online surveys plus measures of choice impulsivity and response inhibition at two timepoints. Four sets of alcohol intake data were collected – using both retrospective diary and real-time methods – just prior to and throughout the pandemic. Changes in consumption and behavioural impulsivity were examined for the whole sample and as a function of binge drinking status.

Key Findings: Significant reductions in total drinks (43%), drinks per drinking day (35%), and binge episodes (79%) pre-pandemic versus during the height of the first wave were evident. Critically, reductions in intake were, in all cases, underpinned by changes in the consumption behaviour of binge, as opposed to non-binge, drinkers. No change was apparent in choice impulsivity or response inhibition as a function of binge status.

Discussions and Conclusions: Reductions in alcohol intake among young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have been driven by changes in the consumption behaviour of binge drinkers. This was not related to any change in behavioural impulsivity.

Implications for Translational Research: Behavioural impulsivity is implicated in numerous prominent theories describing substance misuse and transition to dependence. Substantial reductions in alcohol misuse among binge drinkers during the pandemic, in the absence of any change in impulsivity, highlight the importance of also considering environmental factors.

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