

Australian alcohol consumption increases during COVID-19 crisis

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Australians are drinking alcohol more frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic than before, a new report from The Australian National University (ANU) shows.

Conducted in May this year, the study collected a range of data on [alcohol](#), tobacco and illicit substance use.

The study focuses on self-reported drinking frequency and level of alcohol consumption, comparing it with consumption before the spread of the coronavirus. It is the first study to use longitudinal data to examine the change in alcohol consumption from before and during the pandemic.

Co-author Professor Nicholas Biddle, from the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, said the study found drinking was "slightly higher for [males](#)" and "substantially higher for [females](#)".

The reasons for increases in alcohol consumption were also quite different for males compared to females.

"In general, people are more likely to say their alcohol consumption has decreased rather than increased in these types of surveys," Professor Biddle said.

"Even so, we found self-reported increases in alcohol consumption were larger than in surveys prior to COVID-19. In this survey, 20.2 percent of people reported that their alcohol consumption increased compared with 27.0 percent who said their consumption had decreased."

The study found almost one-in-four women who drank at all (22.8 percent) reported an increase in drinking during May 2020. Almost one-in-five men (17.9 percent) reported an increase in the same period.

"For males, a strong predictor for increased drinking was because of a loss of job or decline in working hours. For females, a strong predictor for increased drinking was having a child-caring role," Professor Biddle said.

"And for both sexes, but particularly males, psychological distress was also a key driver."

The main reason given for an increase in drinking, for both males and females, was spending more time at home. For 67.3 percent of males, this was the reason their drinking increased, while 63.7 percent of females reported the same.

"Increased stress was the second biggest driver for females, with 41.9 percent of females saying this was the cause of their increased drinking," Professor Biddle said.

"For males, boredom was the second-biggest motivating factor, with 49 percent attributing their increased drinking to that."

Another important finding was the co-morbidity between increases in alcohol consumption and increases in the use of illicit drugs.

"The vast majority of adult Australians who said that their consumption of illicit drugs increased also said that their consumption of alcohol increased," Professor Biddle said.

The study also found that for those Australians who said their alcohol consumption increased, most reported this was modest.

Just under half of those who reported an increase in [drinking](#), 45.8 percent, said their increase had been by one to two [standard drinks](#) per week. A further 27.8 percent reported an increase of three to four standard drinks per week.

"What is perhaps more troubling though, is that the increase in the frequency of alcohol consumption was much higher among those males and females who when asked prior to the spread of COVID-19 said that

they drunk relatively frequently," Professor Biddle said.

"Those individuals who increased from an already high base, or those who have had an increase in alcohol consumption alongside a worsening in [mental health outcomes](#), are likely to be of the greatest concern for public policy."

The research was commissioned by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and forms part of the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods COVID-19 monitoring program.

AIHW Deputy Chief Executive Officer Mr Matthew James said the [alcohol consumption](#) study would help build a greater understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic was currently affecting the health and wellbeing of Australians.

"In mid-July, the AIHW will release results from the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey. Having been carried out every three years since 1995, this survey helps us to understand how Australians' behaviour and attitudes towards alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug [consumption](#) have changed over time," Mr James said.

More information: Alcohol consumption during the COVID-19 period: May 2020: csmr.cass.anu.edu.au/research/...-d-19-period-may-2020

Provided by Australian National University

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