



Exploring older people's support needs for making healthier decisions about alcohol during COVID-19

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Briefing Report

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Background and context

This study provides insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted older people's views and use of alcohol; and considers older people's potential needs for support to prevent alcohol-related harm in the older population.

Alcohol is a leading modifiable cause of disease and death (1). Older people are particularly vulnerable to alcohol-related harm; due to age-related sensitivities to alcohol (2). Prior to the pandemic, the highest rates of alcohol-related harm in the UK were amongst the older age group (3).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the experiences and circumstances that are already known to contribute to harmful alcohol use amongst older people; including loneliness, boredom, and mental and physical health problems (4). An in-depth understanding of how older people's views and use of alcohol have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic can inform responses in health and social care to prevent alcohol-related harm in the older population.

Our approach

To examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older people's alcohol use, and support needs, we conducted two complementary studies:

1. Rapid evidence synthesis – we conducted a systematic search of scientific databases to identify empirical studies that gave insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older people's alcohol use, and support needs. We identified 29 relevant articles. We produced an overview of each study's findings and contributions to understanding our research questions; considering why this might be and for whom where possible.
2. Qualitative study – we collected qualitative data (telephone interviews with older people aged 50+, and anonymised transcripts of UK alcohol service web support records for over 50s between March 2020 and July 2021), to understand older people's views, experiences and motivations relating to alcohol use during the pandemic in the UK. We conducted a thematic analysis of our data, drawing on established methods to identify intricacies relating to demographic and circumstantial characteristics.

Overview of findings

Our rapid review highlights that members of the UK general older population (aged >50 years) were **most likely to maintain levels of alcohol use from prior to the pandemic**. However, **when older people reported changes in their alcohol use during the pandemic, they were most likely to report having increased their intake**. Studies estimate 10.7-32% of the UK older population increased their alcohol

use during the initial COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and easing. Evidence also indicates higher rates of hazardous drinking, where alcohol intake could lead to physical, psychological or social harm. Alcohol support workers report an **increase in numbers of alcohol-related hospital admissions amongst older service users during the initial lockdown and easing**, as well as increasing numbers of new referrals, and returning clients who had previously been discharged.

Our qualitative evidence suggests that increased alcohol intake amongst older people in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic was most commonly explained by lost responsibilities and removal of former constraints on their drinking. Stay at home orders meant most of those still in employment began working from home; and childcare for grandchildren paused. This meant there were **more opportunities to use alcohol** in older people's day-to-day lives.

A number of studies summarised in our review clearly indicate that **increased alcohol use amongst older people is associated with poor mental health during the pandemic**; including anxiety and depression, as well as feelings of loneliness, and economic worries. **Growing numbers of older people referred to UK mental health services had probable alcohol dependence**, compared to rates seen prior to the pandemic. **Older service users are more likely to have co-occurring alcohol use disorder and mental health problems when referred during compared with before the pandemic**. Some alcohol service users in the UK had increased their drinking during the pandemic as a coping mechanism during this stressful time; as they faced new difficulties, or were unable to employ their usual coping strategies due to stay at home orders and other restrictions. Similarly, in our qualitative study of older people not engaged with alcohol services, for a subset of older people who had experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, alcohol was used as an escape from feelings of stress, anger, frustration and low mood – something that temporarily lightened their mood. This was linked to great increases in their alcohol intake; and is the main reason cited by older people seeking alcohol service webchat support for escalations in their drinking.

High risk groups - Our rapid review indicated that **the younger-old (aged 50-70 years of age)**, particularly, are high-risk for increased alcohol use during the pandemic.

Decreased alcohol intake -

Evidence presented in our review study suggests that **8.6-26% of older people in the UK reported that their alcohol use had decreased**.

Our qualitative study indicates that for most, reduced alcohol intake was related to the loss of their usual contexts for drinking, such as pubs, due to stay-at-home orders. Our research suggests that this group are **likely to resume former levels of alcohol intake**. This resumption may be protracted, as many older people remain wary of risk of COVID-19 infection, or are reluctant to return to drinking settings under COVID-19 restrictions.

Our qualitative study also indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic had **motivated a subsection of older people to limit their intake to promote their health**. Some

heavier drinkers were acutely aware of their vulnerabilities to coronavirus due to their age, and unhealthy lifestyle; and addressed their heavy drinking to reduce their vulnerability during COVID-19. Other older people, particularly those with pre-existing health conditions that could be impacted by increased alcohol intake, consciously restricted their intake during the pandemic, recognising that the increased spare time and restrictions could lead to unhealthy increases in their alcohol intake.

Amongst alcohol service users, the pandemic had supported decreased alcohol use for some, as there was less opportunity to purchase alcohol, and social contexts where alcohol was usually consumed (including pubs) were prohibited.

International comparison – Our review findings indicate that in other countries, older people were similarly most likely to report maintained alcohol intake from levels prior to the pandemic. However, where changes in alcohol intake were reported, findings were mixed across studies as to whether increased or decreased alcohol intake was most likely. It is possible that **a tendency for increased alcohol use amongst older people who had changed their drinking during the pandemic may be particular to some countries, including the UK.**

Older alcohol service users' experiences of support - Evidence identified within our review examining older alcohol service users' experiences of support to address their drinking during the pandemic suggests that most were supported over the phone by support workers; as alcohol services adapted to stay-at-home orders. Whilst this meant more frequent contact, this was a barrier to support workers' assessment of service users, and provision of structured intervention to support reduced alcohol use. Telephone support was unsuitable for older people with memory, speech or hearing impairments, or serious mental health problems.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- **Levels of harmful alcohol use are likely to continue to be a problem amongst older people (aged 50+) in the UK.** This population, who already experienced high levels of alcohol-related harm, were most likely to maintain or increase their alcohol use from pre-pandemic levels.
- Ongoing concerns about the risk of COVID-19 and a slow return to social situations that promote drinking, may offer an opportunity for **intervention to promote longer term reductions** in alcohol intake amongst older people
- Initiatives to address alcohol-related harm are needed, with a **focus on people in the age range 50-70 years**. Hazardous alcohol use was most common in this subsection of the older age group before COVID-19 and they are most likely to have increased their intake.

- Alcohol and mental health services should be prepared to focus on **addressing co-occurring alcohol and mental health problems amongst older people** during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic; ensuring support is accessible to older people, who often face age-related barriers to engaging with support.
- **Monitoring long-term changes in alcohol consumption amongst older people** during and after the pandemic should be a public health priority. Older people likely require **support in the short/medium term to review their alcohol intake**, and understand how to balance their enjoyment of alcohol with its impact on their health.

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