



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

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Executive Summary

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Background and context

Older people in the UK experience the highest rates of alcohol-related harm of all age groups. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the factors that are already known to contribute to harmful alcohol use amongst older people; including loneliness, boredom, and mental and physical health problems. This research provides insights into how older people's views and use of alcohol have changed during the pandemic, and considers their potential needs for support. The aim is to contribute to our understanding of how to prevent alcohol-related harm in the older population.

Our approach

- **Evidence synthesis:** A rapid review of research studies that explores the impact of the pandemic on older people's alcohol use, or related support needs
- **Qualitative study:** to understand older people's views, experiences and motivations about alcohol use during the pandemic, with analysis of data from telephone interviews with older people aged 50+, and anonymised transcripts of UK alcohol service web support chats with older adults.

Key findings

- A majority of the UK older population have **maintained their alcohol intake during the COVID-19 pandemic. Where alcohol use had changed, increase was most likely** (up to 32% of older people). Stay-at-home orders and restrictions created more opportunities to drink, for older people whose alcohol use had previously been constrained by responsibilities that were put on hold during the pandemic.
- Increased alcohol use amongst older people was **associated with poor mental health** during the pandemic. Alcohol was reportedly used as a coping mechanism during this stressful time.
- Our evidence synthesis highlighted the **younger old (50-70 years of age) as high risk** for increased alcohol use during the pandemic.
- A minority (8-26%) **reduced their alcohol intake** during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was related to **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.
- The COVID-19 pandemic 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. Others anticipated that more spare time and restrictions could lead to unhealthy increases in their alcohol intake.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- 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 should **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 **address 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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