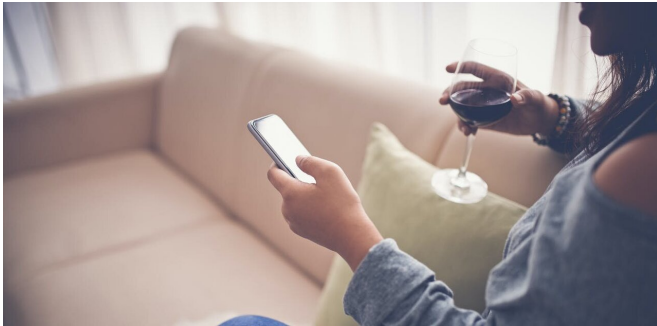


# Women are drinking more during the pandemic, and it's probably got a lot to do with their mental health

2 June 2020, by Shalini Arunogiri, Caroline Gurvich and Jayashri Kulkarni



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COVID-19 has significantly affected our collective mental health.

For many people, social disconnection, financial strain, increased obligations in the home and ongoing uncertainty have created distress—and with it, a need for new ways of coping.

One way people may choose to cope with stress is [through the use of alcohol](#).

We're now starting to understand the degree to which [alcohol](#) use has increased in Australia during COVID-19. While the data aren't alarming so far, they suggest women are [drinking](#) at higher levels than usual during the pandemic, more so than men.

This trend is likely linked to the levels of stress and anxiety women are feeling at the moment—which, research suggests, are disproportionate to the distress men are experiencing.

## Alcohol consumption and COVID-19

Early reports of [increased alcohol purchasing](#)

raised the alarm that we might see an increase in alcohol use across the population during lockdown.

However, recent data from the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) suggests overall, [alcohol consumption](#) remained relatively stable during April. Only 14% of Australians reported increased use of alcohol in the previous month.

But [women are over-represented](#) in this group. Some 18% of women reported increased alcohol use in the previous month, compared with only 10.8% of men.

Similarly, preliminary results from our [COVID-19 mental health survey](#) of 1,200 Australians in April found a significantly higher proportion of women had increased their alcohol intake: 31.8%, versus 22.5% of men.

Why are we seeing this disparity between women and men? The answers may lie in what we know about why women drink, and in the disproportionate burden of stress women are facing as a result of COVID-19.

## Women tend to drink for different reasons to men

In Australia [in 2016](#), 14% of men and 7% of women drank alcohol to risky levels.

Although [fewer women than men drink alcohol regularly](#), alcohol consumption among women has increased in the past decade, particularly in middle-aged and older women. This mirrors international trends that suggest [women may be catching up](#) to men in terms of their alcohol consumption.

Overall, Australia has observed a reduction in risky drinking across the population, with increasing

numbers of [young people choosing not to drink](#).

In contrast, women in their 50s are the only subset of the Australian population with rising rates of alcohol use. In 2016, data showed for the first time, they were more likely to drink at risky levels than younger women.

Drinking has become more normalized among women in this middle-to-older age group, potentially contributing to the rise in alcohol use. Alcohol has become a commonly [accepted coping mechanism](#) for distress, with women feeling comfortable to say "I just had a bad day. I needed to have a drink."

This highlights a theme that frequently underpins problematic alcohol use in women: what's termed a "coping motive." Many studies have found more women drink alcohol to cope—with [difficult emotions or stressful circumstances](#) – as compared to men, who more often drink alcohol in social settings or as a reward.

### **Women seem to be struggling more during the pandemic**

With this in mind, it's unsurprising we're seeing increased alcohol consumption among women during COVID-19. [International data](#) show women have been more likely to experience symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, Australian data show [loneliness](#) has been more of a problem for women (28%) than men (16%) during this past month under lockdown.

[Caregiver load](#) has also been a source of stress, with women almost three times more likely than men to be looking after children full-time on their own during COVID-19.

While we don't have enough evidence yet to tell us conclusively whether family violence incidents have increased during the pandemic, this may add to the mental health burden for some women during COVID-19.

Further, [younger female workers](#) are disproportionately affected by the economic crisis in

the wake of COVID-19. The fact women make up [a majority of the casual workforce](#) makes them highly vulnerable at this time.

Together, it seems COVID-19 is having a different mental health impact on women compared to men. And this is likely to be intertwined with their increased drinking during the coronavirus pandemic.

Whether we'll see higher rates of problem [alcohol use](#) or dependence in women after the pandemic remains unclear. However, we know [women](#) who drink at unsafe levels [experience complications more quickly](#), and [enter treatment later](#), with perceived stigma a barrier to help-seeking.

It's vital we draw our attention to these gender-specific differences in mental health and alcohol consumption as we formulate our mental health pandemic plan.

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