

Middle-aged women engaging in risky drinking habits

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New research has found that middle-aged women are drinking at increasingly risky levels, challenging the traditional view that young people and men are the ones at risk of alcohol harms.

The study, *The who and what of women's drinking: Examining risky drinking and associated socio-demographic factors among women aged 40–65 years in Australia*, shows one in five middle-aged women are drinking at 'binge drinking' levels, a significant increase since 2001.

The paper, a collaboration by researchers from The George Institute for Global Health, Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) and the Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, was published in the *Drug and Alcohol Review* journal today.

Lead author, Mia Miller, Research Associate and PhD candidate at The George Institute for Global Health says there are a number of factors that have led to the increase of drinking levels within this population group.

"Middle-aged women are drinking at levels that put them at a significantly higher risk of harm than women were 20 years ago," Ms Miller said.

"This may come as a surprise given that binge drinking is a behaviour commonly associated with young people, but there are a number of factors that have likely led to alcohol use becoming increasingly prevalent amongst women.

"It is not about blaming the individual for their alcohol use. Rather, we need to look at the societal factors that are driving increased alcohol use and address these through comprehensive, evidence-based policies such as regulations on advertising and home delivery, and the introduction of policies such as minimum unit price."

Co-author, Menzies NHMRC Early Career Research Fellow, Dr Cassandra Wright, says the risks to women from alcohol use are higher than for men.

"Women experience alcohol harms more quickly and at lower levels of consumption than men," Dr Wright said.

"We have to remember that alcohol use is associated with more than 200 diseases and conditions, so this does mean more women experiencing harms."

The research identified certain subgroups at greater risk of harmful drinking, including single women, women without a university degree, women living in regional and remote areas and women not in paid work.

Dr Wright says it is a complex research area with findings highlighting that more women in the workforce may be related to this in multiple ways.

“Women have more economic freedom and are more accepted in traditionally male spaces. However, women now also juggle multiple roles as workers and carers, which can lead to heightened stress,” Dr Wright said.

“Previous research from our team has shown that many women of this age group are drinking as a form of reward and to provide relief and ‘time-out’ from extensive work and childcare responsibilities.”

According to Ms Miller, we need to ensure we not only support women but also look at policy and social factors that affect their alcohol use.

“The policy response to increased alcohol use in this group therefore requires a comprehensive approach that includes addressing mental health and stress and facilitating ways for women to unwind and socialise without alcohol, as well as looking at broader factors like the way that alcohol advertising increasingly targets women,” Ms Miller said.

The full paper can be read in *Drug and Alcohol Review* [[link to be provided](#)].

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Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies is one of Australia’s leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and a leader in global and tropical research into life-threatening illnesses, Menzies continues to translate research into effective partnerships and programs in communities across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

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The George Institute

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