

## Changes in alcohol use and mental health among young Australian adults during the COVID-19 pandemic: a prospective cohort study

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**Introduction and Aims:** Young people may have elevated risk of negative consequences of lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study assessed changes in mental health and alcohol use during COVID-19 restrictions in young Australians.

**Design and Methods:** Data were drawn from a recent subsample ( $n=443$ ) of a prospective cohort originally recruited in secondary school to complete annual surveys. The subsample completed an additional COVID-19 survey during COVID-19 restrictions (May–June 2020), which was compared to responses from surveys prior to the pandemic. Mixed effect models with time and gender as the primary predictors were conducted to estimate changes in: (i) alcohol use; (ii) alcohol-related harms; (iii) mental health using the Patient Health Questionnaire Depression 9-item (PHQ-9) and Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7); and (iv) self-reported help-seeking.

**Results:** Overall alcohol consumption during the restrictions declined by 17% (incidence rate ratio [IRR] 0.83; 95% confidence interval [CI] 0.73, 0.93), compared to February 2020, and there was a 34% decline in alcohol-related harms in the same period (IRR 0.66; 95% CI 0.55, 0.80). Mean mental health symptom scores increased during COVID-19 restrictions on the PHQ-9 (coefficient: 1.29; 95% CI 0.72–1.86) and GAD-7 (0.78; 95% CI 0.26–1.31), but there was no increase in help-seeking (odds ratio 0.50; 95% CI 0.19–1.32). Results were largely consistent by gender.

**Discussion and Conclusions :** This study found evidence for a reduction in alcohol consumption and related harms during the COVID-19 restrictions, but increases in depression and anxiety symptoms during the first wave of the pandemic.

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