

Complexity in alcohol-related ambulance attendances: the role of comorbid mental health, suicide, and self-harm presentations during COVID-19 lockdowns

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Introduction: Changes in alcohol consumption and harms in vulnerable groups including those with comorbid mental health or suicide and self-harm behaviours are of concern given the social and service restrictions experienced during lockdowns. Closure of services may have displaced help seeking onto emergency services. The present study examined changes in complex alcohol-related ambulance attendances following COVID-19 lockdowns.

Method: We compared alcohol intoxication attendances during the 2020-2021 Stage 3 and 4 lockdowns to matched days in the two years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (2018-2019) using Victorian data from the National Ambulance Surveillance System. To explore complex alcohol-related harms, we examined two comorbid outcomes: mental health symptoms, and suicide and self-harm behaviours.

Results: Despite fewer alcohol intoxication attendances during lockdowns (n=15,064) compared to matched days in 2018-19 (n=16,989), there was a 37% increase in the number of attendances involving mental health symptoms (IRR: 1.37, 95%CI [1.28-1.47], p<0.001), and a 9% increase in attendances involving suicide and self-harm behaviours (IRR: 1.09, 95%CI [1.05-1.15], p<0.001). These increases were apparent in geographically disparate areas, with comorbid attendances involving mental health symptoms increasing by 40% in Melbourne (IRR: 1.40 [1.30-1.51] p<0.001), and 25% in regional Victoria (IRR: 1.25 [1.07-1.44], p=0.005).

Discussions and Conclusions: Increases in the number of complex alcohol intoxication ambulance presentations involving mental health symptoms or suicide and self-harm behaviours demonstrates that a greater burden was placed on ambulance services during lockdowns. This may reflect a reluctance by people to seek help via other services, or a lack of alternatives available.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Our findings suggest that emergency help-seeking for alcohol-related harms by vulnerable groups in the community increased during lockdowns. The provision of ample alternative services for these complex comorbid conditions should be considered when lockdown periods are enforced by governments.

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