Alcohol consumption among an Australian cohort of women eligible to participate in the national breast screening program

PETA STRAGALINOS1,2, JASMIN GRIGG1,2, VICTORIA MANNING1,2, ALISON CHEETHAM1,2, GEORGE YOUSSEF3,4,5, DARREN LOCKIE6, MICHELLE CLEMSON6, ISABELLE VOLPE1,2, CHLOE BERNARD1,2, LIAM SMITH7, PETER BRAGGE7, ROBIN BELL8, DAN I LUBMAN1,2

1Turning Point, Eastern Health, Melbourne, Australia
2Monash Addiction Research Centre, Eastern Health Clinical School, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
3School of Psychology, Deakin University, Geelong, Australia
4Centre of Drug, Addictive and Anti-social Behaviour Research (CEDAAR), Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
5Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Melbourne, Australia
6Maroondah BreastScreen, Eastern Health, Melbourne, Australia
7BehaviourWorks Australia, Monash Sustainable Development Institute, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia
8School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Presenter’s email: peta.stragalinos@monash.edu

Introduction/Aims: Alcohol is a major modifiable risk factor for breast cancer in women, yet population awareness of this risk is low. We sought to understand alcohol consumption levels among women from a large, representative breast screening program cohort, including the proportion of women whose drinking exceeds new national alcohol guidelines, and to explore associations with sociodemographic and health-related factors.

Method: This was a retrospective analysis of cross-sectional data from the Victorian Lifepool breast screening cohort collected between May 2010 and November 2019. The dataset comprised sociodemographic and health-related information collected via a comprehensive questionnaire completed at cohort entry.

Results: Of 49,240 participants, mean age was 59.94 years (SD=7.14, range 40-94). The majority of participants (84.54%, n=42,155) consumed alcohol, with 15.13% (n=7,448) drinking at a level exceeding 2020 revised Australian alcohol guidelines, and 7.87% (n=3,873) drinking daily. Women had a higher probability of exceeding revised alcohol guidelines if they were aged 50-59 years, born in Australia, living in a major city, with higher education attainment, at the lowest level of sociodemographic disadvantage, and in a healthy weight range.

Discussion/Conclusions: Findings highlight a need to implement strategies to reduce harmful alcohol use among a cohort who have been overlooked as a focus of public health campaigns and interventions – educated, sociodemographically advantaged women who may otherwise be engaging in positive health behaviours (e.g. maintaining a healthy weight). Targeted health promotion campaigns and broader policy changes to reduce alcohol consumption among this at-risk group could have substantial public health benefit.

Implications for Practice or Policy: To the authors’ knowledge, this is the first exploration of alcohol consumption among a population-level cohort of breast cancer screening participants. National breast screening programs may be uniquely positioned to provide timely,
strategic public health messages to prevent alcohol-attributable harm, and have potential for extensive reach.

**Implications for Translational Research:** This study highlights the need for initiatives to reduce harmful alcohol use among women attending breast screening services. Findings informed the Health4Her hybrid effectiveness-implementation trial (Clinical Trials: NCT04715516) of a brief intervention to improve alcohol literacy and reduce harmful alcohol use among women attending a Victorian breast screening service.

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