



GREY MATTERS: Preventing and responding to alcohol and other drug problems among older Australians

Information Sheet 1



Why the growing use of alcohol and other drugs among older Australians needs attention

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Australia's population is ageing and is doing so at a faster rate than ever before.

Between 2010 and 2050 it is estimated that the number of people aged 65 to 84 years will double and those aged 85 and over will quadruple.¹

Today's baby boomers have used alcohol and other drugs at higher rates than previous generations. Many will continue to do so in older age and this is associated with greater risk of harm.

The increase in the size of this population will dramatically increase the absolute number of older individuals with substance use problems.²

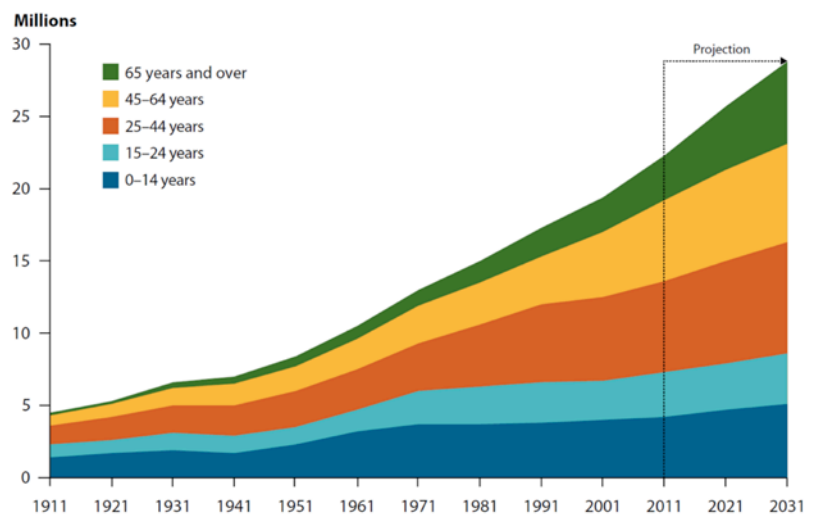


Figure 1: Historical and projected Australian population, 1911–2031 (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011)³

Contributory Factors

Factors that will contribute to increased levels of alcohol and other drug problems among older Australians include:

- Their reduced the capacity to metabolise, distribute and eliminate drugs. Those who do not reduce their intake as they become older are at risk of more harm even though their intake may not have changed.
- An increase in the disposable income and buying power of many older people which may increase alcohol consumption and corresponding problems.
- Major advances in preventive and curative health care services mean that Australians are not only living longer but are also healthier with longer term exposure to potentially harmful drug use.
- New patterns of consumption are also occurring; especially in relation to alcohol and prescription drug use.
- Life changes such as new patterns of socialising, retirement, bereavement or social isolation may also contribute to increased risk.
- Many baby boomers hold views, values and expectations of a 'quick-fix' which is likely to lead to increased use of medications.²
- More medications are now available for a wider array of conditions than ever before. Increased awareness of these medications appears to be contributing to increased use of psychoactive substances.²
- Use of medicines including opioids and sedative/hypnotics is increasingly widespread among older Australians. This can be harmful particularly when used in conjunction with alcohol and other substances.

- Many people who have used drugs in the earlier parts of their life have continued to do so into their later decades.
- The widespread introduction of opioid substitution programs, needle and syringe programs and enhanced treatments for blood borne and other related diseases for illicit drug users has prevented many premature deaths. Consequently, many long term illicit drug users have survived into older age and will require ongoing treatment.

Service Implications

Internationally, it is estimated that the number of older people with alcohol and other drug problems, or requiring treatment for a substance use disorder, will have more than doubled between 2000 and 2020.⁴ A healthier, less frail older population is more likely to be able to cope with the health impacts of problematic use for longer.

Many adverse health impacts from problematic use are now treatable, whereas previously, they may have been fatal or at least required abstinence from use.²

Therefore, both the improved overall health status of older people and advances in health care can reduce the incentive to address problematic use until accumulated harms become more severe in older age.

There are multiple factors that will increase the number of older people with substance use problems. These driving factors require the attention of, and appropriate responses from, health and welfare professionals.

In addition, there will be a need for many services and workers to have an enhanced understanding of the physiological and psychological impact of drug use among ageing populations.

This information sheet is from the *Grey Matters Information Sheet Series* developed by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, Flinders University to reduce alcohol- and other drug-related harm among Australians aged 55 and over.

This Information Sheet and other resources on alcohol and drugs and older people can be located at: <http://nceta.flinders.edu.au/index.php?cID=590>



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