

Hidden harm?



Alcohol and older people in Wales

An ageing population

The ageing population means that, far from diminishing, the problems of alcohol misuse in older people are set to rise, especially when combined with the drinking patterns that younger adults of today are adopting, and which they are likely to continue into their older years.

Jayne Dyson, 2006¹

Currently, around 18% of the population of Wales is aged 65 years or older, equating to around 548,000 people.² During the past fifty years in Wales the number of people aged over 60 has increased by 30%,³ and according to recent projections there will be 185,000 (29%) more pensioners in Wales in 2033 than in 2008, even taking into account planned changes in the official retirement age.⁴ This growth in the post-retirement population in Wales is largely the result of increasing average lifespan, and offers many positive possibilities. It also presents significant challenges in terms of ensuring our later years are ones in which we enjoy good health.

Alcohol and older people

The absolute number of elderly people with alcohol use disorders is on the increase, and a real danger exists that a silent epidemic may be evolving.

Henry O'Connell et al (2003)⁵

Overall, alcohol consumption tends to decline with age. The 2009 Welsh Health Survey found that 52% of men of age 16 or older and 38% of women said they had drunk more than the recommended maximum amount of alcohol in the previous week.⁶ Amongst both men and women, those aged 35-44 were the most likely to have exceeded the limit, with 61% of men in this age group and 49% of women having drunk more than the guideline amounts. This compared with 34% of men aged 65 or older and 17% of women in that age group who said they had drunk more than recommended.

This general pattern of declining average consumption, however, may conceal serious and often overlooked alcohol-related problems amongst some older people. There is also evidence that the proportion of older people drinking more than the recommended amount is rising. The 2003-04 Welsh Health Survey found



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that 22% of men aged 65 and older and over and just 7% of women had drunk more than the guideline amounts,⁷ compared with 34% and 17% in 2009.

Whilst older people on the whole are likely to drink alcohol for similar reasons to other age groups, some factors related to ageing may prompt increased alcohol use:

- Disruption to lifestyle following retirement
- Increased social isolation
- Bereavement
- Long term ill-health and/or pain
- Disrupted sleep

Alcohol overuse in older people can also be linked to, or exacerbate, a number of mental and physical health problems, some of which are particularly age-related:

- Anxiety, depression and poor sleep
- Incontinence
- Liver and kidney problems
- Self-neglect and/or malnutrition
- Memory problems and confusion
- Hypothermia
- Poor balance and falls

In addition, alcohol may interact badly with prescription medicines, the use of which is significantly higher amongst older people.⁸

A hidden problem?

A number of reasons have been suggested why older people's drinking has received relatively little attention. One reason is clearly the preoccupation of much of the news media

with young people's binge drinking in town and city centres. In contrast, older people may often be solitary home drinkers, and may be very discrete about their drinking and about their personal problems in general.⁹

Alcohol Concern's own consultation with alcohol services and older people's services in Wales in 2010¹⁰ identified the following other possible reasons that older people's drinking may be overlooked:

- Lack of identification by healthcare professionals, for example failure to assess for alcohol problems when people attend A&E for falls
- Poor liaison between the NHS and local alcohol services
- Ageist attitudes amongst professionals, with excessive drinking not seen as a problem beyond a certain age
- Similar attitudes amongst an older person's family, supporting alcohol misuse as a pleasure and comfort to an older person felt to have little else in their life

These views are supported by findings of the Royal College of Physicians, who have suggested that up to 60% of older people admitted to hospital for confusion, falls at home, chest infections and heart failure may have unrecognised alcohol problems.¹¹ Given this, it is not surprising that the Welsh Assembly Government's substance misuse strategy notes that it is important for professionals who come into contact with older people to identify any alcohol problems rather than assuming, for example, that falls or confusion can be attributed to other causes.¹²

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Alcohol Concern's consultation also highlighted a number of reasons why older people themselves may not wish to, or feel able to access alcohol treatment services:

- Shame and stigma attached to admitting an alcohol problem
- Negative images of substance misuse services, and a perception that they cater mostly for younger clients and users of illegal drugs
- A lack of older staff in some alcohol services, with older clients perhaps less likely to relate to younger staff
- Increasing normalisation of drinking in older people's social circles
- Denial of any problem, supported to some extent by the wider society's denial of older people's drinking as an issue
- Contradictory information about the benefits and harms of alcohol use, with persistent suggestions in the media that small amounts of alcohol (particularly wine) may promote good health
- Alcohol can be a positive pain management choice
- Poor transport

Other research has raised questions about the effectiveness of any alcohol services older people may actually access:

- Whether existing guidance on daily and weekly maximum numbers of units of alcohol is appropriate to older people, with guidance from the USA recommending no more than one standard American drink (one and a half UK units) per day for older men and women.¹³

- Whether existing screening tools for identifying alcohol misuse are appropriate to older people and whether they may lead to some older people's alcohol problems not being recognised.¹⁴

In spite of these factors, research has indicated that older people are likely to respond to treatment for alcohol misuse as well as or even better than younger people,^{15,16} and so there is clearly scope for addressing this issue if we can ensure interventions are appropriate and effective.

Recommendations

Given that alcohol misuse amongst older people is an issue that is certain to remain and increase, but is also one that can potentially be effectively managed, Alcohol Concern makes the following recommendations for action:

- Professionals working with older people, including healthcare and social work professionals, as well as housing and other care staff, need to be aware of alcohol misuse as a potential issue amongst older people, and to recognise that problems traditionally attributed to the ageing process may be indicators of alcohol misuse. This issue needs to be addressed in initial professional training and in ongoing professional development.
- Better co-ordination and joint working is needed between local older people's services and alcohol treatment services to ensure that older people are able to access alcohol treatment in the ways that suit them, possibly via existing older people's provision.



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- A study needs to be made of whether current unit guidance for the general population is appropriate to all age groups in Wales (and the UK as a whole) with a view to developing specific guidance for older people.
- Alongside this, the relevance to older people of current screening methods for alcohol misuse needs to be assessed, as well as the appropriateness of making wider use in Wales (and the UK as a whole) of screening tools aimed specifically at older people, such as the Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test – Geriatric Version (MAST-G).
- Further work is need to investigate how the carers of older people can be supported to recognise and deal appropriately with any alcohol misuse by the person they are caring for.

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About Alcohol Concern

Alcohol Concern is the national agency on alcohol misuse campaigning for effective alcohol policy and improved services for people whose lives are affected by alcohol-related problems. We are a membership body working at a national level to influence alcohol policy and champion best practice locally. We support professionals and organisations by providing expertise, information and guidance. We are a challenging voice to the drinks industry and promote public awareness of alcohol issues.

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