

Perspective: Balancing alcohol consumption in our ageing population

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What must be remembered however is that moderate alcohol consumption is also closely related with increased socialisation. Credit: Hindrik Sijens

When it comes to alcohol consumption, the drinking habits of young people tend to attract the most attention.

However with the ageing population and a recent increase in the [alcohol consumption](#) among [older people](#) the issue of alcohol and ageing is becoming an increasingly important area of research.

Despite this increased interest however, there is little research that takes

into account both the physical as well as the psychological impacts on older people.

Medical research tends to focus on the negative physiological consequences of drinking, particularly as older people are more likely to have a range of medical conditions that can be exacerbated by alcohol consumption.

Older people are also more likely to be taking prescription medication that may react adversely with alcohol.

This could suggest that alcohol consumption by older people, even in moderate amounts, is particularly problematic.

Alcohol use link to socialisation

What must be remembered however is that [moderate alcohol consumption](#) is also closely related with increased socialisation.

When we spoke to older people about their relationship with alcohol for a soon to be published research paper on social engagement, setting and alcohol use among a sample of older Australians, we found a strong link between socialisation and alcohol consumption.

Many of the older people we interviewed saw alcohol as a "social leveller" and drinking was closely associated with social gatherings and celebrations.

Some participants also described using alcohol as a "marker" that differentiated between "work time" and "leisure time".

Far from being used as a coping mechanism to deal with difficult situations and we found that alcohol appeared to serve an important role

for the majority of participants by enhancing positive situations and encouraging socialising with friends and acquaintances.

This is of particular importance as people get older and they lose many traditional avenues for socialisation leaving them at risk of social isolation.

Indeed sociability is one of the main reasons given by older people when asked why they drink alcohol.

In light of this, any public health response that aims to minimise the alcohol-related harm in older people must also take into account the significant psycho-social benefits which may result from moderate alcohol consumption.

By taking into account both the physical and psychological impacts of moderate alcohol consumption we can create a clearer picture of the complex role alcohol plays in an active and socially-engaged [ageing population](#).

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