

Long work hours linked to alcohol risk for nurses and midwives

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It is well known that nurses and midwives work schedules are often irregular and involve shifts, now new research from the University of Otago, Christchurch in association with the University of Queensland has also shown that long hours and harmful alcohol use are linked.

The new study, published in the *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, surveyed 4419 [nurses](#) and midwives, including 867 nurses from New Zealand, using a large cohort from a longitudinal population-based study of nurses in Australia and New Zealand, and midwives in Australia.

It showed that nearly 14% engaged in harmful drinking of more than two standard drinks a day, and there were significant associations between working long and irregular hours and [alcohol abuse](#).

The study found that nurses or midwives working between 40 and 49 hours a week or over 50 hours are likely to engage in harmful daily drinking, with an increase in dose response relationship; that is the longer people worked the more they are likely to drink.

“Other studies have found that 6-10% of nurses abuse alcohol at any one time and that 10-15% will abuse it at some time during their careers so this result regarding the impact of long working hours and alcohol is significant as it is substantially higher,” says lead researcher Professor Philip Schluter.

“It’s important as well because international research shows that long

working hours have a detrimental association with workplace accidents and compromised patient safety.”

Conversely the prevalence of self-reported diagnosis of alcohol abuse in this study is small at only 1.6%, much lower than young adult New Zealanders at 9-13.6%.

“This is a surprisingly low figure and suggests that many nurses and [midwives](#) may be under reporting or not revealing harmful drinking,” says Professor Schluter.

The study also found that the older the nurse or midwife the more likely they are to engage in harmful daily drinking, with those over 60 having the highest risk. This is not altogether surprising as other studies have shown that generally speaking older people engage more in steady, daily drinking, he says.

Professor Schluter says the results emphasise the need for increased awareness of the need for detection of [alcohol](#) problems and strategies for supportive intervention in preventing abuse.

“Since the 1970s [working hours](#) have been steadily increasing in Australia and New Zealand and there’s a much greater need to understand the health impacts, especially as the health workforce in Australia makes up 7% of all employees.”

Provided by University of Otago

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