

Study unveils 'hidden' alcohol abuse among older people

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A study has uncovered a growing drink problem among older people and researchers are now urging the Government to review its UK health strategy to support society's "invisible addicts".

The University of Sunderland and Newcastle University, in collaboration with Age UK and South of Tyne and Wear PCT, have been assessing the extent of [alcohol abuse](#) among the older generation in the region which often results from big changes such as retirement, bereavement, feelings of [boredom](#), [loneliness](#) and depression.

The news comes as Joan Bakewell, the Government's former voice of [older people](#) investigates the problem and confronts her own social drinking habits for the BBC's Panorama programme on Monday, September 10.

To date, little research has been carried out into the problem and its impact on drinkers or their families, as the effects are often less obvious, go unreported, and unlike younger drinkers, more older people drink in their own homes. It's also an area which has received insufficient national attention through alcohol policies, which focus heavily on tackling the [binge drinking](#) culture or hazardous drinking in younger people.

Previous work by the study team has shown that even when clinicians have been encouraged to screen for excessive alcohol use, they often fail to deliver health-promoting advice to older people, while nurses report

that they do not engage with them as they worry about depriving them of the social benefits of drinking.

Ann Crosland, Professor of Nursing at the University of Sunderland, one of the lead researchers, said: "An ageing population means that the number of older people with [alcohol problems](#) is inevitably on the increase.

"The need to establish an understanding for the problems faced by this generation has now become urgent. It would be a sad reflection on society if we just ignore this."

The research team has been gathering data for the last two years through a review of literature, the mapping of current services and gathering the views and experiences of older people aged between 51 and 90. This has been done as part of the North East based Fuse* (The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health).

The team's research area covered South of Tyne & Wear (Sunderland, South Tyneside and Gateshead); locations with a higher-than average older population, high levels of social and economic disadvantage, a strong industrial past and pockets of heavy drinking.

Their findings have now been presented to government ministers in a Public Service Review to highlight the issue. It's hoped the review will eventually lead to service providers, such as GPs, routinely screening for drink problems in older people.

Of the 47 service providers included in the mapping process, only one reported that they specifically catered for the needs of older drinkers. Most were intended to be accessed for people over age 18, and most promotional material and alcohol services were specifically geared towards young people.

Professor Crosland said: "More information is needed to understand the patterns of drinking in later life and to establish the extent, nature and impact of hazardous drinking among older age groups.

"Service providers must start to consider the needs of older drinkers in their commissioning decisions. Drug and alcohol services also need to engage more effectively with this age group."

General population data suggests that alcohol consumption among the British decreases with age, but that over 55s are more likely to be regular drinkers in this country than their European counterparts. Up to 23 per cent of men and eight per cent of women aged 60 and over drink more than the recommended weekly limits. Older women appear to be at particular risk because they are more likely to experience loss through bereavement, loss of good health leading to depression and loneliness.

Those who took part in the study deemed as low risk drinkers, associated alcohol with sociability, relaxation and forgetting their troubles. Many of those identified as problems drinkers, had mental health problems, drank at home in isolation, felt shame, and thought it was too late to change, with too few services able to help them.

[Bereavement](#) and lack of meaningful activity were reported as triggering an increase in their alcohol intake. But many revealed that their excessive drinking had started earlier in their lives and had carried on into old age.

John Briers, Chief Executive of Age UK South Tyneside said: "This research highlights what we have known for many years based on many of our service users who are isolated, depressed, bereaved and vulnerable. Alongside this research we have been delivering health promoting advice through a variety of community and domiciliary based services. We are extremely grateful to South of Tyne and Wear PCT

who commissioned this work after we raised with them some of our concerns. I would also like to thank colleagues in Age UK Gateshead and Age UK Sunderland who also assisted with this research."

Eileen Kaner, Professor of Public Health at Newcastle University said: "With our [ageing population](#) in the UK, it is clear that the number of older people with alcohol problems is rising. However, services often focus on younger drinkers and problem drug use as well as alcohol issues. This can be very off-putting for older people seeking advice or support about their drinking. In addition, many older people are not aware that [alcohol](#) might not be a good mix with other medication that they are taking. So there is a clear need for more discussion of these issues by health and social care practitioners."

Provided by University of Sunderland

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