

Alcohol use among older adults in Scandinavian countries found to be increasing

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A large proportion of older people state that they drink alcohol twice a week or more and the difference in alcohol use between men and women

is getting smaller, according to researchers at the University of Agder.

In recent decades, [alcohol](#) consumption among older adults has increased in both Norway and Scandinavia.

In the Scandinavian countries, this trend first started in Denmark in the 1970s. Just over a decade later, the same thing happened in Sweden and Norway. The increase was greatest in the period up to around 2005. After that, [alcohol consumption](#) among [older people](#) has been more stable.

"In Norway, over 80% of older people between the ages of 60 and 79 state that they drink alcohol. Around one in four said they drink twice a week or more often. We also see that the [gender differences](#) in alcohol use are becoming less pronounced," says Professor Terje Emil Fredwall at the Center for Care Research, University of Agder.

Together with colleague Anne Jørstad Antonsen, he conducted [a scoping review](#) (in Norsk) on alcohol use among older adults, which is based on 51 research and development studies on the subject.

The last time such a large scoping review was published in Norway was in 2011.

Older people drink more often, but in small amounts

When older people drink alcohol, it is usually wine. It is most common to drink one to two units per session. Two thirds of the women over 60, and around half of the men report this.

"Generally speaking, we can say that older people in Norway drink alcohol more frequently than before, but in relatively small quantities. There is still a larger proportion of older men who drink—and who drink

often—compared to women," says Fredwall.

Research shows that alcohol is often associated with [social engagement](#), gatherings and enjoyment of life in older people. However, several of the studies show that alcohol use can also be associated with difficulties such as [social isolation](#), stress and illness, or life transitions such as retirement and bereavement.

Alcohol consumption is one of the most important risk factors for the loss of healthy years of life and for non-communicable diseases. This applies to both young and old.

But for people in later life, [alcohol use](#) can be particularly challenging. As we get older, our metabolism slows down, and both [body mass](#) and proportion of fluid in the body decrease.

"The studies we reviewed show that older adults often don't recognize or have a lack of knowledge about the risks associated with drinking alcohol. Existing health challenges, as well as the risk of accidents and fall injuries, can be intensified when you drink. There are also a number of possible negative consequences for older people who combine drinking alcohol with the use of medicines," says research fellow Anne Jørstad Antonsen.

Just under one in three people in Norway over the age of 65 who say they drink one or more times a week say that they also use potentially addictive medication. The use of such medicines seems to increase somewhat the more often one drinks.

"It could be that older people don't know enough about the risks of using alcohol and psychotropic drugs. The studies indicate that the use is downplayed and rationalized as something older people 'just do.' However, it is also important to be aware that [older adults](#) are more

vulnerable to serious side effects from concurrent use than younger people," Fredwall says.

Provided by University of Agder

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