

Older adult mental health

WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA) is focused on improving mental health outcomes for older Western Australians. WAPHA works closely with the aged care sector and other key stakeholders to plan, commission and design community and health care systems that address the needs of older Western Australians.

Psychological therapies for people with mental illness living in residential aged care facilities

WAPHA commissions evidence-based psychological therapies for people living in residential aged-care facilities (RACFs). These services are for residents of the facilities with a diagnosed mental illness and those at risk of mental illness.

There is evidence that RACF residents have very high rates of mental illness., however mental health services are not routinely available to older people living in RACFs and are not within scope of the personal care or accommodation services RACFs provide. It is estimated that approximately 39 per cent of all permanent aged care residents are living with mild to moderate depression¹.

The services WAPHA commissions for RACFs are targeted to:

- people with mild to moderate mental illness who are residents of residential aged care
- residents with severe mental illness who are not more appropriately managed by a State or Territory Government Older Persons Mental Health Service, and who would benefit from psychological therapy

- individuals who are experiencing early symptoms and are assessed as at risk of developing a diagnosable mental illness over the following 12 months if they do not receive appropriate and timely services, may also be eligible in some instances.

Social connectedness

Social isolation and loneliness are an increasing problem for older Australians, which can impact their physical and mental health.

WAPHA is working with local service providers and partners in the City of Mandurah on a two-year pilot project, to increase social connections and overcome barriers to accessing community services for people at risk of isolation and loneliness.

Older adults and primary health care

General Practitioners (GPs) play a significant role in the lives of many older adults, as primary health care providers and as a point of referral to other health services. In 2012-13, older adults in Australia visited the GP 10.4 times on average, with people over 60 accounting for 57 per cent of those who attended a GP more than 20 times, and 45 per cent of those who attended between 12 and 19 times².

The use of primary health by older adults has increased considerably in the past 15 years. This is largely due to people living longer, more people acquiring and being diagnosed with more conditions, and each condition being managed for a longer period of time³.

1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Australia's welfare 2015. Australia's welfare series no. 12. Cat. no. AUS 189. Canberra: AIHW. 2015*

2 Britt, H. et al. *General practice activity in Australia. General Practice Series 40, Sydney University Press, 2016.*

3 Radomiljac, A., Joyce, S. & Powell, A. *Health and Wellbeing of Adults in Western Australia 2016, Overview and trends. Western Australian Department of Health, 2016.*

Mental health, alcohol and other drugs and older people

Good mental health is a key factor associated with healthy ageing, and this is determined by a combination of psychological, biological and/or social and cultural factors⁴.

A number of issues may impact on the mental health of older people and lead to increased psychological distress⁵, including:

- losing the ability to live independently
- experiencing bereavement (particularly with death of a life partner)
- a loss of income following retirement⁶.

It is estimated that 10 to 15 per cent of older adults experience depression, and approximately 10 per cent experience anxiety⁷.

The rates of alcohol and other drug (AOD) use among older people is an emerging issue. There has been an increase in drug-induced deaths among older people since 1999⁸. In 2019, those aged 70 and over continued to be the age group most likely to drink daily⁹.

WAPHA is committed to helping GPs identify early signs of depression, anxiety, mental ill-health and AOD issues in older Western Australians. We will continue to work with GPs to improve pathways to appropriate mental health and AOD treatment and community support services.

⁴ World Health Organization. *Mental health and older adults. Factsheet no. 381.* Geneva: WHO. 2013.

⁵ World Health Organization (2013).

⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015)

⁷ National Ageing Research Institute (2009)

⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics. *Causes of death, Australia, 2016.* ABS cat. no. 3303.0. Canberra: ABS. 2017

⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019. Drug statistics series no. 32. Cat. no. PHE 270.* Canberra: AIHW. Viewed 24 September 2020.



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This is one of a series of factsheets regarding mental health and primary health care, developed by WAPHA. Further factsheets and other resources can be found at www.wapha.org.au/mental-health-framework. The information in this factsheet was accurate at December 2020.