

# The interface between mental health issues and alcohol and other drugs

## Alcohol and other drugs

The use of alcohol, and other drugs (AOD), including tobacco, prescribed medications and illicit substances, impacts on the physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities in Western Australia. Problematic AOD use is not always visible and can be the underlying cause of a wide range of health and social harms.

For instance, alcohol was reported as the third highest risk factor (behind tobacco use and high body mass) contributing to disease burden in Australia, accounting for 5.1 per cent of the overall burden of disease and injury<sup>1</sup>.

The 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) found that 16.8 per cent of Australians consumed more than two standard drinks per day. An estimated 25 per cent of Australians (fourteen years or older) drink more than four standard drinks at least once per month (risky single occasion drinking)<sup>2</sup>. This indicates that a high percentage of the population are vulnerable to disease and injury caused by alcohol use.

Drug use (including illegal drugs and the misuse of pharmaceuticals) was estimated to have accounted for 2.3 per cent of Australia's burden of disease and injury, making it an important health issue.

The 2019 NDSHS estimated that 43 per cent of Australians aged fourteen and over had illicitly used drugs at some point in their life and 16.4 per cent had illicitly used drugs in the last 12 months<sup>3</sup>. Cannabis was the most commonly used illicit drug in 2019, with 11.6 per cent of Australians using it in the last 12 months. This was followed by cocaine (4.2 per cent), ecstasy (3.0 per cent) and non-medical use of pain-killers and opioids (2.7 per cent)<sup>4</sup>.

WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA) invests more than \$12 million annually into the delivery of health services relating to alcohol and other drugs.

Details of WAPHA's commissioned AOD services can be found at the [WAPHA website](#).

## AOD and mental health

The significant overlap of people who experience substance misuse problems in addition to experiencing mental illness is well documented.

Mental Health in Australia: A Snapshot, 2004-05<sup>5</sup> found that:

- Adults reporting mental or behavioural problems were more likely than those without such problems to drink at a level which is risky/high risk in the long term.
- 32 per cent of adults reporting mental or behavioural problems reported being current daily smokers compared with 20 per cent of those without mental behavioural problems.
- Adults reporting a high/very high level of psychological distress were more likely to be current daily smokers (35 per cent) than were those with a moderate level (25 per cent) or low level (17 per cent) of psychological distress.

The combination of substance misuse and mental illness makes diagnostic and treatment decision making difficult and successful interventions are often dependent on concurrent responses to both disorders<sup>6</sup>.

WAPHA invests in a number of initiatives to improve access to treatment services designed specifically to support people who experience co-occurring mental health and AOD issues.

1 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *Australian Burden of Disease Study: impact and causes of illness and death in Australia 2011*. 2016.

2 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019. Drug Statistics series no. 32. PHE 270*. Canberra AIHW. 2020

3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020)

4 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2020)

5 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Mental Health in Australia: A Snapshot, 2004-05*, Canberra. 2006

6 Australian Government Department of Health *Fifth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan*, Canberra, p8. 2017

For example, the Practitioner Online Referral Treatment Service (PORTS) can treat individuals with mild to moderate substance use issues along with symptoms of anxiety and depression. WAPHA also recognises the connection between substance use and suicide in our suicide prevention activities along with initiatives to ensure appropriate and safe use of prescription medication to reduce harms.

## Building capacity in the sector

WAPHA invests in education and training to build the capability and confidence of the drug and alcohol, mental health and primary care workforce to respond to people experiencing co-occurring mental health, AOD and physical health issues.

WAPHA funds The Treating Alcohol and Drugs in Primary Care (TADPole) program, which aims to increase the capacity of the Western Australian primary care workforce to provide alcohol and drug treatment and support. The project involves a series of education activities covering general and specific alcohol and drug topics and skill-based techniques delivered in face-to-face education sessions, short video lectures and webinars<sup>7</sup>.

In addition, WAPHA promotes the AOD education and training opportunities for health professionals available through the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine.

In 2019, WAPHA funded a joint project between the WA Association of Mental Health and WA Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies to work intensively with community mental health and support services to assess and improve their dual diagnosis capability. The organisations involved now have appropriate policies, procedures and trained workers to respond to people experiencing co-occurring mental health and AOD issues.

## headspace

headspace provides early intervention mental health services to 12-25 year olds. The service is free or low cost and is designed to provide early access for young people and their families to receive the help they need for problems affecting their wellbeing.

AOD is one of the four core areas headspace focuses on, alongside mental health, physical health and work/study support.

headspace provides support and information on the physical and mental health impacts of AOD use. Counsellors are available to address the complexities of AOD issues. Confidential online and telephone support is also available via headspace's online platform eheadspace.

More information about headspace can be found at the [headspace website](#)

<sup>7</sup> Edith Cowan University, Tadpole website: <https://www.ecu.edu.au/schools/medical-and-health-sciences/our-research/systems-and-intervention-research-centre-for-health/treating-alcohol-and-drugs-in-primary-care-tadpole/overview> Accessed on 2 April 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](http://www.wapha.org.au/mental-health-framework). The information in this factsheet was accurate at December 2020.