# Alcohol use among women aged 35-59 years in Sydney's Northern Beaches

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### Women living in the Northern Beaches of Sydney are hospitalised due to alcohol at a higher rate than any other region in NSW

Women living in the Northern Beaches of Sydney are hospitalised due to alcohol at a higher rate than any other region in NSWi. To better understand this statistic, the NSLHD Health Promotion alcohol program team asked Northern Beaches women aged 35-59 to share their experiences and thoughts about the role of alcohol in their lives.

Through a series of focus groups in 2019 we found that many women in this cohort drink alcohol as a release, and to cope with the stress from complexities and pressures of life. Women also drink to strengthen social connections with friends and partners. Some women drink because of pressure to fit in and to avoid judgement.

When it comes to health concerns, women talked about ‘living in the now’ and were willing to overlook the health costs of drinking alcohol (such as hangovers, weight gain and cancers) in favour of the short-term benefits such as being “more bubbly, chatty and confident” in social situations. One participant summed this up by saying “you don’t feel like it is going to kill you right now”.

We undertook a detailed survey of 583 women to gain a deeper insight into their drinking behaviour. Over half (56%) confirmed the belief that there is problematic drinking among their peers.

Survey findings were segmented using the validated alcohol screening tool AUDIT C, which allows for comparisons of participants according to alcohol harm risk level. There was an even spread of low-risk (n=180), moderate-risk (n=184) and high-risk (n=193) drinkers. When reflecting on their own drinking, the majority of low-risk drinkers described themselves as
‘occasional drinkers’ compared to moderate- and high-risk drinkers who described themselves as ‘regular drinkers’.

### Key findings

**High-risk drinking at home**

Women were drinking most often at home (61%) with friends or their partner. Drinking at home was prominent for high-risk drinkers, with 83% of their drinking occurring at home. Home is a place where women who drink too much “can easily hide it” as stated by one focus group participant.

**Low-risk drinking and socialisation**

It appears socialisation has a large influence when it comes to low-risk drinkers, with half of their drinking occurring with friends, often when eating out (33%). High-risk drinkers stood out as being the main group who drink on their own (18%).

**Motivations for drinking**

All women reported drinking for enjoyment and socialisation. Moderate- and high-risk drinkers reported higher rates of drinking for stress release, with high-risk drinkers additionally reporting they drink due to parental stress and as a reward.

**Risky drinking and willingness to change**

A significant percentage of high-risk drinkers wanted to cut back on their drinking (59%) suggesting they are aware they are drinking more than they should be according to health guidelines. Low-risk drinkers seemed to be content with their consumption, while moderate-risk drinkers were in the middle, with 36% wanting to cut back and 31% not wanting to change.

**Influence of others on drinking habits**

Women in the high-risk group were found to be largely influenced by peers, with 62% finding it hard not to have a drink when others are drinking. Interestingly on the flip side, the impact of others not drinking had a potential positive effect on women in this group, with 30% reporting it would make them consider not drinking, and 27.5% reporting it would make them feel like they shouldn’t be drinking. This reinforces the focus group findings that women not drinking can make other women reflect on their own drinking, shining a light on the powerful influence a woman can have on others when she decides not to drink.

**Gatherings, children and alcohol**

In terms of social environments, 81% of survey respondents reported that all gatherings they attended had alcohol present. Concerningly, 60% reported that all child-orientated gatherings they attended had alcohol present. This opens up the conversation about the potential for more positive role modelling at child-centred gatherings. This was supported by the survey findings when 30% of women said they would reduce alcohol consumption to role model for children.

**Where to from here**

The focus group and survey findings are now being used to inform the development of health promotion strategies to create a supportive environment that reduces alcohol related harm among women.

For more information on the focus group and survey findings, visit [this link.](https://www.nslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/HealthPromotion/Pages/WomenandAlcohol.aspx)

i NSW Combined Admitted Patient Epidemiology Data and ABS population estimates (SAPHaRI). Centre for Epidemiology and Evidence, NSW Ministry of Health. (HealthStats NSW accessed 9/3/2021).

### Metadata