

6 SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS IN AUSTRALIA

Disorders relating to the use of alcohol or drugs necessarily require the consumption of alcohol or drugs above a certain level. However, this use is not sufficient alone for a person to be diagnosed with a substance use disorder. Typically substance use disorders involve impaired control over the use of these substances, with continued use despite considerable psychological and physical problems.

Both types of substance use disorders, namely harmful use and dependence, were covered in the survey. Harmful use requires the use of a substance to be responsible for physical or psychological harm and may lead to disability or a breakdown in interpersonal relationships. Dependence is associated with symptoms such as becoming tolerant to the effects of alcohol or drugs, characteristic withdrawal symptoms after stopping alcohol or drug use, drinking or using drugs in larger amounts or for longer periods than intended and unsuccessful efforts to decrease or cut down on use.

Diagnoses of substance harmful use and substance dependence were derived for alcohol, as well as for four separate drug classes: cannabis, sedatives, stimulants and opioids.

6.1 Prevalence of substance use disorders in the Australian population

One in twenty Australians aged 16-85 years (5.1%) had a substance use disorder in the 12 months prior to interview (Table 6-1). Alcohol harmful use disorder was the most common form of substance use disorder with a prevalence of 2.9%. Both harmful use and dependence were more commonly diagnosed for alcohol (2.9% and 1.4% respectively) than for drugs (0.9% and 0.6% respectively). Among the drug use disorders, the prevalence of cannabis and stimulant related disorders were higher than the equivalent sedative and opioid related disorders.

Table 6-1: Prevalence of 12-month substance use disorders by substance use disorder type and sex

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Persons (%)
Alcohol			
Harmful use	3.8	2.1	2.9
Dependence	2.2	0.7	1.4
Cannabis			
Harmful use	0.8	0.3	0.6
Dependence	0.7	0.2	0.4
Stimulants			
Harmful use	0.5	0.2	0.4
Dependence	0.4	0.1	0.3
Sedatives			
Harmful use	np	np	0.04
Dependence	0.1	0.1	0.1
Opioids			
Harmful use	np	np	0.1
Dependence	0.1	0.1	0.1
Any drug			
Harmful use	1.3	0.5	0.9
Dependence	0.9	0.4	0.6
Any substance			
Harmful use	4.7	2.4	3.5
Dependence	2.6	1.0	1.8
Any substance use disorder	7.0	3.3	5.1

Note: Totals are lower than the sum of disorders as people may have had more than one type of substance use disorder in the 12 months.
np Not available for publication, but included in totals where applicable.

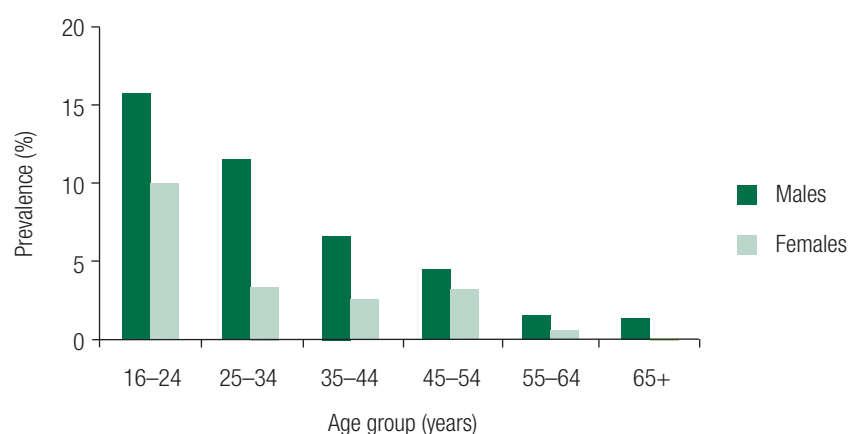
6.2 Prevalence of substance use disorders in different population sub-groups

6.2.1 Sex and age

Overall, males were more than twice as likely to have substance use disorders compared to females (7.0% compared to 3.3%), with this difference being true for alcohol harmful use, dependence and any drug use disorder. In relation to specific drug use disorders, both cannabis harmful use and dependence and stimulant harmful use were more common in males than in females (Table 6-1).

The prevalence of any substance use disorder declined with age. However, this decline was more gradual among males than females (Figure 6-1).

Figure 6-1: Prevalence of 12-month substance use disorders by age and sex



6.2.2 Social and demographic characteristics

Substance use disorders were more likely to occur among those who were never married or in de facto relationships and those who were separated, widowed or divorced (7.5% and 7.0% respectively) compared to those who were married (3.5%) at the time of the interview. The prevalence of substance use disorders was highest among people who were unemployed (8.5%) compared to people who were employed and not in the labour force (5.5% and 4.9% respectively). The prevalence did not differ markedly for education. People who were born in Australia and other English speaking countries had higher levels of substance use disorders (6.0% and 4.4% respectively) than those born in non-English speaking countries (1.6%) (Table 6-2).

Table 6-2: Prevalence of 12-month substance use disorders by sex, marital status, labour force status, education and country of birth

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Persons (%)
Marital status			
Married/De facto	5.5	2.0	3.5
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	10.8	3.6	7.0
Never married	9.9	4.8	7.5
Labour force status			
Employed	7.2	3.4	5.5
Unemployed	13.3	4.4	8.5
Not in the labour force	8.3	3.1	4.9
Education			
Post-school qualification	7.7	3.7	5.6
School qualification only	5.5	3.3	4.3
Did not complete school	8.6	4.5	6.5
Country of birth			
Australia	8.4	3.7	6.0
Other English-speaking country	4.8	3.8	4.4
Non-English speaking country	2.0	1.3	1.6

Note: Numbers presented for marital status, labour force status and education are age-standardised.

6.3 Impact of substance use disorders

6.3.1 Days out of role

The number of days out of role in the 30 days prior to interview reported by people with each type of substance use disorder is presented in Table 6-3. The average number of days out of role for those with any form of substance use disorder was 3.3 days in the previous 30 days. Any drug dependence was associated with the largest number of days out of role at 6.4 days.

Table 6-3: Days out of role by type of 12-month substance use disorder

	Days out of role in previous 30 days (mean)
Alcohol harmful use	2.4
Alcohol dependence	3.8
Any drug harmful use	3.9
Any drug dependence	6.4
Any substance use disorder	3.3

Note: Total is lower than the sum of disorders as people may have had more than one type of substance use disorder

6.3.2 Interference with life

Interference with life was assessed separately for each substance dependence disorder across the four domains of home responsibilities, work or study, close relationships and social life. Table 6-4 shows the proportion of people with alcohol dependence and any drug dependence who rated the impact of their mental disorders as severe or very severe interference. One in five people with alcohol dependence and with any drug dependence (21.0% and 20.6% respectively) reported significant interference in at least one of the life domains.

Table 6-4: Proportion of people with severe or very severe interference across different life domains by type of 12-month substance dependence disorder

	Home (%)	Work or study (%)	Close relationships (%)	Social life (%)	Any life domain (%)
Alcohol dependence	15.4	11.1	13.2	11.9	21.0
Any drug dependence	13.6	9.4	13.6	17.2	20.6

Note: This information is not available for those diagnosed with alcohol harmful use or drug harmful use.

Any domain is lower than the sum of individual domains as people may have experienced severe or very severe interference in more than one life domain.

6.3.3 Psychological distress

The proportion of people with each type of substance use disorder, who reported each of the four levels of psychological distress, as measured by the Kessler 10 scale (K10), is presented in Table 6-5. Levels of distress differed for the different types of substance use disorder.

Over half (57.2%) of people with any drug dependence and one quarter (27.4%) with any drug harmful use reported high to very high levels of psychological distress. Among people with alcohol dependence one in three (38.7%) experienced high or very high psychological distress compared to one in six (15.3%) with alcohol harmful use.

Table 6-5: Proportion of people with each psychological distress (K10) level by type of 12-month substance use disorder

	Low (%)	Moderate (%)	High (%)	Very high (%)
Alcohol harmful use	59.6	25.1	13.3	2.0
Alcohol dependence	32.7	28.6	24.4	14.3
Any drug harmful use	44.1	28.4	18.5	8.9
Any drug dependence	19.9	22.9	41.1	16.1
Any substance use disorder	48.6	26.7	17.5	7.3

Note: Totals are lower than the sum of disorders as people may have had more than one type of substance use disorder.

6.4 Service use by people with substance use disorders

The proportion of people with each type of substance use disorder who used services for mental health problems in the previous 12 months is shown in Table 6-6. The results showed that only one quarter (24.0%) of people with any substance use disorder used services for mental health problems in the past 12 months.

Higher levels of service use were observed among those with dependence disorders compared to those with harmful use disorders. Moreover, there was a trend for higher service use among people with drug

harmful use or dependence compared to people with alcohol harmful use or dependence. One half (52.4%) of people diagnosed with drug dependence and one in four (24.1%) with drug harmful use had used services in the 12 months prior to interview. Whereas one third (35.5%) of people with alcohol dependence and one in six (15.5%) with alcohol harmful use used services in the previous 12 months.

Table 6-6: Service use by type of 12-month substance use disorder

	Service use (%)
Alcohol harmful use	15.5
Alcohol dependence	35.5
Any drug harmful use	24.1
Any drug dependence	52.4
Any substance use disorder	24.0

Note: Total is lower than the sum of disorders as people may have had more than one type of substance use disorder.

