

# Alcohol and COVID-19: Supporting healthy and safe Victorian communities

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 **Alcohol  
Change  
Vic** 

Victorians for  
policy reform



# Alcohol and COVID-19: Supporting healthy and safe Victorian communities

Alcohol Change Vic is a collaboration of health and allied agencies that share concerns about the harmful impacts of the alcohol industry and its products in Victoria. Alcohol Change Vic campaigns for policy change to protect the community from the harm the alcohol industry causes, and to provide balance to the industry's aggressive marketing and normalisation of alcoholic products.

## The members of Alcohol Change Vic are:

- + Australasian College for Emergency Medicine
- + Alcohol and Drug Foundation
- + Cancer Council Victoria
- + Centre for Alcohol Policy Research (CAPR), La Trobe University
- + Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education
- + Public Health Association of Australia (Victoria)
- + Royal Australasian College of Surgeons
- + St Vincent's Health Australia
- + The Salvation Army
- + Turning Point
- + Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association
- + Violence Prevention Group, School of Psychology, Deakin University
- + Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

## Summary of recommendations

Alcohol Change Vic is calling for the Victorian Government to introduce the following changes to Victorian liquor law to help keep communities healthy and safe during and after the COVID-19 outbreak.

1. Prevent the home delivery of alcohol by packaged alcohol retailers within 2 hours of an alcohol order and after 10pm at night.
2. Prevent promotions of excessive alcohol discounts of 50 per cent or more, and multi-buy or bulk purchase discounts that incentivise the sale of excessive quantities of alcohol.
3. Prevent promotion of 'buy now, pay later' or 'Afterpay' services to buy alcohol.
4. Introduce a stronger test for liquor licence applications based on harm and community impact.

Alcohol Change Vic is also calling for the Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation to end fast-tracking of temporary licences for online sales and home delivery of alcohol.

## Background

It's never been more important to support individuals, families and their communities to be healthy and safe. However, during the COVID-19 outbreak there have been increases in alcohol sales across Australia,<sup>iii</sup> and the alcohol industry has rapidly pivoted its marketing strategies to exploit the pandemic and push alcohol use at home on vulnerable people in isolation.

We know more alcohol sold means more harm. More alcohol dependence. Poorer mental health. More domestic assaults. And more people diagnosed with preventable cancers and liver disease.

We also know that alcohol use, especially heavy drinking, makes people more vulnerable to COVID-19. This is because alcohol weakens people's immune systems and increases their risk of respiratory failure, one of the most serious COVID-19 complications.<sup>iii</sup>

Alcohol use increases people's risk of other health problems, causes injuries and fuels violence, adding pressure to Victoria's hospitals and emergency services.

Alcohol use worsens negative impacts of social isolation, and financial and social stresses associated with COVID-19, by exacerbating mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, and fuelling family violence, abuse and neglect in Victorian homes.<sup>iv,v,vi</sup>

And increases in alcohol use during the pandemic may lead to more people developing long-term drinking habits and alcohol dependence, and long-term health impacts such as heart disease, liver disease and cancer.

Alcohol use is known to cause at least seven types of cancer: breast, bowel, mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus, and liver cancer.<sup>vii</sup> Once consumed, alcohol travels through the body and causes cell mutations that can lead to cancer. Each alcoholic drink increases a person's risk of getting cancer but the more someone drinks, the greater their risk. Alcohol causes nearly 3500 people to get cancer,<sup>viii</sup> and more than 2000 people to die from cancer,<sup>ix</sup> in Australia each year.

Each year under normal conditions, alcoholic products kill nearly 6,000 Australians including more than 1,300 Victorians from disease,<sup>x</sup> and are responsible for more than 39,000 hospitalisations in Victoria.<sup>xi</sup>

## Big alcohol retailers are profiting from the COVID-19 pandemic

The alcohol industry has acted quickly to find new ways of pushing alcohol sales to take advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to market its products. Online alcohol sales, including home delivery and 'click and collect' orders, have increased sharply as big alcohol retailers aggressively expand their capacity to sell alcohol online.<sup>xii</sup> Woolworths and Coles (which together own around 70 per cent of the packaged alcohol market), have reported large surges in alcohol sales and forecast elevated alcohol sales to continue.<sup>xiii xiv</sup> At the end of April 2020, alcohol retailers lifted their generous voluntary caps on products sales per customer. These caps allowed each customer to buy as much as 12 bottles of wine and 2 bottles of spirits in a single transaction. The industry is reporting a shift towards people buying even larger quantities of cheaper alcohol, with increases in sales of bulk alcohol and larger pack sizes.<sup>xv</sup>

This follows the alcohol industry dramatically increasing the availability of alcohol in Victoria prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In recent years big alcohol corporations have opened increasing numbers of chain liquor stores pushing cheap alcoholic products.<sup>xvi</sup> Big alcohol corporations concentrate stores in disadvantaged areas of the state,<sup>xvii</sup> where they know they will make the most profits. We know that the more alcohol stores there are in an area, the more the local community suffers with alcohol-fuelled violence, family violence, injuries and disease.<sup>xviii</sup> Victoria is the liquor store capital of Australia with the most stores of any state or territory.<sup>xix</sup> This has made alcohol more accessible than ever in our state, placing children and other vulnerable people at risk of harm, and compromising the safety of our communities.

This is compounded by the alcohol industry's irresponsible marketing of its products. The alcohol industry knows that alcohol causes cancer and other serious harms, yet it obscures the evidence about the health impacts of its products and continues to aggressively market its products in the community in order to maximise its profits.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, alcohol retailers have been relentlessly promoting rapid delivery services and daily drinking at home on social media, and bombarding people with targeted social media advertisements. A recent study of alcohol marketing in Australia during the COVID-19 outbreak found that sponsored alcohol marketing posts appeared on Facebook and Instagram feeds every 35 seconds, promoting easy access to alcohol without leaving the home, as well as buying more alcohol, and using alcohol at home to cope, survive or feel better.<sup>xx</sup>

## Alcohol fuelled harm is increasing in Victoria

We know that alcohol use during the COVID-19 outbreak is fuelling violence in people's homes. Victoria Police has reported an increase of almost seven per cent in family violence offending compared to this time last year.<sup>xxi</sup> Alcohol use increases the frequency and severity of family violence, and is involved in a significant proportion of family violence incidents in Victoria. At least one in five and as many as half of all family violence incidents are fuelled by alcohol use.<sup>xxii, xxiii</sup>

The harms fuelled by the alcohol industry and its products have increased dramatically in Victoria over recent years, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is shown by huge increases in hospital presentations and ambulance attendances for alcohol-fuelled injuries and violence across the state prior to the pandemic, which overwhelmed Victorian ambulances and emergency departments. Ambulance attendances for alcohol-fuelled violence and injury in metropolitan Melbourne increased by 304 per cent between 2004-05 and 2017-18, and by 83 per cent in regional Victoria between 2011-12 and 2017-18.<sup>xxiv</sup> In Victoria the number of hospital admissions due to alcohol use increased by 74 per cent from 2007-08 to 2016-17, from 21,239 to 39,974.<sup>xxv</sup>

While pubs, bars and clubs have been closed due to COVID-19, emergency departments are reporting that fewer people are presenting with injuries and harms from alcohol overall. But they are dealing with more severe alcohol-fuelled violence as well as greater harm suffered by high-risk drinkers, as people drink more heavily at home.

Use of alcoholic products drives more people to seek help from treatment services than any other substance. It is expected that people's need for treatment services will increase as COVID-19 restrictions ease, due to people establishing harmful patterns of alcohol use. Elements of the treatment sector have contracted, creating a pending bottleneck of demand. This will be exacerbated by an influx of people new to the treatment sector who are concerned about their alcohol use during COVID-19 restrictions.

## Alcohol policies to support healthy and safe Victorian communities

Now more than ever, effective alcohol policies are needed to keep individuals, families and communities safe and well and to counterbalance the alcohol industry's relentless marketing of its products.

Alcohol Change Vic is calling for the Victorian Government to introduce the following key changes to the Victorian *Liquor Control Reform Act 1998* (Liquor Act) to help protect people from alcohol-fuelled harm.

### 1. Preventing rapid and late-night delivery of alcohol

Delivery of alcoholic products to people's homes in rapid timeframes or late at night is likely to cause harm to vulnerable people. It allows people to buy alcoholic products on impulse and to keep using alcohol when supplies have run out. Rapid and late-night alcohol deliveries may also provide avenues for people who are already intoxicated to quickly access more alcohol without having to leave their home.

A 2020 VicHealth survey found that forty per cent of people who used an alcohol delivery service weekly said they would have stopped drinking if the delivery service was not available, and nearly three quarters had 11 or more drinks in a session at least once a week. More than 20 per cent of Victorians surveyed who use alcohol delivery services (other than Airtasker) weekly regularly receive their alcohol orders despite already being intoxicated.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Alcohol Change Vic is calling for the Victorian Government to introduce the following controls on home delivery of alcohol:

1. Prevent the delivery of alcohol by alcohol retailers (packaged liquor, general and limited licence holders) within 2 hours of an alcohol order.
2. Prevent the delivery of alcohol between 10pm and 10am.

## 2. Preventing harmful alcohol promotions

Big alcohol retailers are directly targeting Victorians with relentless social media and online advertising. Alcohol retailers promote extreme price discounts of alcoholic products, often resulting in alcohol sold at prices lower than soft drink and water. They also use promotional offers, such as multi-buy, bulk purchase or volume discounts, to incentivise the sale of large volumes of alcohol and encourage people to buy more than they had intended. These promotions encourage people to drink large volumes of alcoholic products and appeal to young people and heavy drinkers. We know that the cheaper alcoholic products are, the more people drink, and the more they suffer harm.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Alcohol retailers are also encouraging people to use 'buy now, pay later' services to buy alcohol online. This encourages people to buy alcohol impulsively and removes cost barriers that might otherwise prevent people buying large quantities of alcohol.

Alcohol Change Vic is calling for the Victorian Government to introduce new standards for alcohol promotions by Victorian alcohol retailers in the Liquor Act. The Act should be amended to prevent harmful or risky promotions by alcohol retailers, including the following types of promotions:

1. Promotions that provide incentives or encourage people to buy excessive quantities of alcoholic products. This should include preventing the discounting of alcoholic products by 50 per cent or more (as is the case with on-premises discounting in the Australian Capital Territory),<sup>xxviii</sup> and multi-buy or bulk purchase discount promotions that incentivise the sale of excessive quantities of alcoholic products.
2. Promotion of 'buy now, pay later' or 'Afterpay' services to buy alcoholic products online.

## 3. Considering harm and community impact in liquor licence decisions

We all want communities across Victoria to be healthy and safe places to live, work and raise children. However, the number of Victorian liquor licences granted has increased more than five-fold in the past three decades, driving increases in alcohol-fuelled harm in our communities.

Potential harm and community impacts of new liquor licences are not being considered and decisions are heavily weighted in favour of the alcohol industry. Local governments and community members have little say in the process.

In addition, during the COVID-19 state of emergency, temporary limited licences for online sales and delivery of alcohol have been granted within 24 hours, with no fees and without harm or social impact being effectively considered.

Alcohol Change Vic is calling for the Victorian Government to introduce a stricter test for liquor licences that requires applicants to show that a new licence will not detract from the safety and wellbeing of the community and is in the public interest. Liquor licence applicants should be required to provide a community impact assessment and high-risk applicants should be required to consult with the local community.

Alcohol Change Vic is also calling for the Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation to end the granting and fast-tracking of temporary limited licences for online alcohol sales and alcohol delivery during the COVID-19 state of emergency, and not allow COVID-19 to lead to any continuing expansion of the granting of licences for alcohol delivery services.

In addition, the Victorian Government should act to amend the Liquor Act to remove the 'limited licence' category of liquor licences altogether. This has been used by the alcohol industry as a catch-all licence category for a variety of modes of alcohol supply, including online alcohol sales and delivery, preventing scrutiny by local communities. Even before the fast-tracking of temporary limited licences for alcohol delivery during the COVID-19 state of emergency, there were already too many limited licences in Victoria, which had grown to make up a quarter of all liquor licences.<sup>xxix</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education, YouGovGalaxy 2020. Alcohol sales and use during COVID-19 polling snapshot. April 2020. Available at <https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-POLL.pdf>.

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