

Meet the Baby Boozers, a generation who likes a drink

From Depression-era parents who rarely touched a drop, came a post-war generation who took to having a regular tippie, writes ANGELA BENSTED.



If you're reading this with a chardonnay in your hand or a nip of scotch doing duty before dinner then you're a typical Baby Boomer.

You love a drink and you have one nearly every day, a legacy of how you grew up in the booze-soaked 1960s and '70s.

By comparison, Australians are actually drinking less alcohol now than at any point in the past 50 years.

The most recent numbers (2013) published by the

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show daily drinking is at its lowest level since 1991.

Fewer young people are drinking alcohol and people under 40 are less likely to drink alcohol in risky quantities.

But, before you pour yourself another shandy to celebrate Australia's newfound sobriety, let's take a closer look at the numbers.

The picture for 60-69 year-olds is not so rosy, with short-term risky drinkers

increasing by nearly one-third and lifetime risky drinkers increasing by 20 per cent since 2001.

People aged 70 and over are the most likely to drink daily, although they are also the least likely to consume alcohol in amounts considered "risky".

These figures are probably conservative, with Australian researchers reporting older people pour alcoholic drinks 16-32 per cent larger than a standard drink, and older men over-pouring spirits by more than a half-nip.

So why does alcohol feature so prominently in the lives of Baby Boomers born between 1945 and 1963 in a post-war era of relative peace and prosperity?

From the 1950s, Australians steadily increased their alcohol consumption, peaking in 1974-75 at 13.1 litres of pure alcohol a person.

There are many theories about why this has happened. People had more money after World War II. We started to produce beer in bulk, thanks to refrigeration and better production methods.

A surge in European migration led to greater wine production.

As more households came to own a television and mass media infiltrated the living room, alcohol came to be associated with high profile sporting and cultural events.

Who remembers feeling like a Tooheys or two? Or being made to smile by Dr Lindeman?

And women could join the party at the public bar thanks to anti-discrimination laws introduced in the 1970s.

Dr David Ellis, himself a Baby Boomer, has run a busy general practice for 35 years.

"I think that generation, born around the '50s, were a different generation in a lot of ways," he says, recalling his own adolescence with a post-war father he suspects suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome.

"Who remembers feeling like a Tooheys or two? Or being made to smile by Dr Lindeman?"

"He kept to himself a lot and probably drank more than he should. He was a very bright man, very intelligent man and held a good job but there were a lot of issues there and it caused a lot of relationship problems within the family."

He says a lot of young people now might go out on the weekend and drink a lot but they don't drink during the week at all.

"Our generation would have

had a drink every day of the week. It was part of our recreation," he says.

"And we all drank and drove. Back in the day we used to have to walk in a straight line and that was about it. It was almost like a comical thing that a person was a bit drunk."

Author of *The Rum State*, Milton Lewis, traces our boozy habits to Australia's colonial roots when spirits were used in barter and convicts were part-paid in rum.

The 20th century brought mateship rituals of a "shout", with groups taking turns to buy each other drinks at the pub and "work and bust" cycles, where long periods away working in the bush were followed by prolonged binge drinking at home.

In the 1960s, Australians invented the wine cask, bringing cheap, boxed wine to suburban kitchens and making a daily moselle or claret commonplace.

Since then, public health campaigns, random breath testing and changes to alcohol taxes have helped curb consumption.

"People my age see what happens with alcohol because it's so much more publicised these days," Dr Ellis says. "There's a bit of a feeling - I don't know whether it's revulsion or guilt - about drinking."



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But for many Baby Boomers there is still an underlying misconception about how much is too much.

There's little research on safe limits for older people's use of alcohol.

For the general population, the National Health and Medical Research Council recommends no more than two standard drinks on any one day and no more than four in a session.

Dr Ellis agrees many people growing up through the '50s and '60s are surprised at the suggestion their average alcohol consumption, while it might be less than it was, is still a lot.

"I have guys who still drink eight stubbies a night," he says.

"Often they're hard workers who think they're entitled to come home and sit down to watch TV and consume a whole lot of grog."

The list of health hazards associated with heavy drinking is long and ugly.

In addition to falls and heart problems, older drinkers are more likely to develop liver diseases, irritable bowel syndrome and incontinence, obesity, sexual dysfunction and of course, cancer – particularly of the mouth, oesophagus, throat, liver and breast.

Older bodies are less able to process alcohol so a few drinks will hit Baby Boomers harder and affect them for a longer time.

If you go drink-for-drink with your grandchild you will likely register the higher blood-alcohol level.

It also means the two generous glasses of wine you

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS - BEER



NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS - WINE



NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS - SPIRITS



➤ For more, search "alcohol" at nhmrc.gov.au

might have enjoyed every night for the past 40 years won't be broken down as easily in your system, often resulting in higher blood pressure and abnormal liver function.

There are links between heavy, prolonged alcohol use and Alzheimer's disease.

It can also affect the brain indirectly by decreasing the absorption of thiamine, resulting in Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome which impacts on learning and memory.

Some affected by this condition become permanently disabled and need long-term institutional care.

Those few daily drinks also compete with a growing number of other chemicals which have crept into the baby boomer's daily regime, as many older Australians are regular users of prescription and over-the-counter medicines.

Are you washing down your arthritis tablets with a "medicinal" red wine? That could lead to stomach inflammation, gastrointestinal bleeding and liver damage.

Still having a tippie at cocktail hour while taking a course of antibiotics? That puts you at greater risk of vomiting, headache and convulsions.

There is also a toll on the economy, with the number of older people who received public treatment for alcohol and other drug problems increasing during the past decade.

People aged 60-69 recorded a 79 per cent increase in alcohol-related treatment episodes, most commonly for falls, abnormal

heart rhythm or alcohol dependence.

Despite the numbers, Dr Ellis remains optimistic, believing health risks are better understood by Baby Boomers these days and their attitude towards alcohol has changed.

"It's like a light has been turned on with a lot of them," he says.

His theory will be tested when the latest figures on drinking habits and attitudes towards alcohol are published next year, after households were surveyed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare again last month.

"Baby Boomers see the stories about people falling over and fighting in The Valley, about people getting king hit. Their attitude towards alcohol has changed a lot," Dr Ellis says.

"The last thing you want as you get older is not to be in control."

MORE INFORMATION

➤ National Health and Medical Research Council's 2009 Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol nhmrc.gov.au

➤ Alcohol related dementia fightdementia.org.au/about-dementia/types-of-dementia/alcohol-related-dementia

➤ Alcoholics Anonymous aa.org.au
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